The CORNER HOUSE GIRLS SNOWBOUND

GRACE BROOKS HILL

La Von Walratth
5014 Corby st.

"The bobsled bumped over these hammocks, gathering speed."

(*See Page 173*)

THE CORNER HOUSE GIRLS SNOWBOUND

HOW THEY WENT AWAY
WHAT THEY DISCOVERED
AND HOW IT ENDED

BY

GRACE BROOKS HILL

AUTHOR OF "THE CORNER HOUSE GIRLS," "THE CORNER HOUSE GIRLS ON A TOUR," ETC.

ILLUSTRATED BY
THELMA GOOCH

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BOOKS FOR GIRLS

By Grace Brooks Hill

The Corner House Girls Series

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THE CORNER HOUSE GIRLS
THE CORNER HOUSE GIRLS AT SCHOOL
THE CORNER HOUSE GIRLS UNDER CANVAS
THE CORNER HOUSE GIRLS IN A PLAY
THE CORNER HOUSE GIRLS' ODD FIND
THE CORNER HOUSE GIRLS ON A TOUR
THE CORNER HOUSE GIRLS GROWING UP
THE CORNER HOUSE GIRLS SNOWBOUND

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The Corner House Girls Snowbound

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THE CORNER HOUSE GIRLS SNOWBOUND

CHAPTER I

A GHOST AND A GOAT

THERE was a vast amount of tramping up and down stairs, and little feet, well shod, are noisy. This padding up and down was by the two flights of back stairs from the entry off the kitchen porch to the big heated room that was called by the older folks who lived in the old Corner House, "the nursery."

"But it isn't a nursery," objected Dot Kenway, who really was not yet big enough to fit the name of "Dorothy." "We never had a nurse, did we, Tess? Ruthie helped bring us up after our own truly mamma died. And, then, 'nursery' sounds so *little.*"

"Just as though you were kids," put in Master Sammy Pinkney, who lived in the house across the street, and nearest, on Willow Street, from the Kenway sisters' beautiful home in Milton, but who felt that he, too, "belonged" in the old Corner House.

"No. It should be called 'the playroom,'"

agreed Tess, who was older than Dot, and considerably bigger, yet who no more fitted the name she was christened with than the fairylike Dot fitted hers. Nobody but Aunt Sarah Maltby—and she only when she was in a most severe mood—called the next-to-the-youngest Corner House girl "Theresa."

It was Saturday morning, and it had begun to snow; at first in a desultory fashion before Tess and Dot—or even Sammy Pinkney—were out of bed. Of course, they had hailed the fleecy, drifting snow with delight; it looked to be the first real snowstorm of the season.

But by the time breakfast was well over (and breakfast on Saturday morning at the old Corner House was a "movable feast," for the Kenway sisters did not all get up so promptly as they did on school days) Sammy Pinkney waded almost to the top of his rubber boots in coming from his house to play with the two younger Kenway sisters.

Of course, Sammy had picked out the deepest places to wade in; but the snow really was gathering very fast. Mrs. MacCall, the Kenways' dear friend and housekeeper, declared that it was gathering and drifting as fast as ever she had seen it as a child "at home in the Hielands," as she expressed it.

"'Tis stay-in-the-hoose weather," the old Scotch woman declared. "Roughs and toughs, like this Sammy Pinkney boy, can roll in the snow

like porpoises in the sea; but little girls would much better stay indoor and dance 'Katie Beardie.' "

"Oh, Mrs. Mac!" cried Dot, "what is 'dancing Katie Beardie'?"

So the housekeeper stopped long enough in her oversight of Linda, the Finnish girl, to repeat the old rhyme one hears to this day amid the clatter of little clogs upon the pavements of Edinburgh.

"'Katie Beardie had a grice,
It could skate upon the ice,
Wasna that a dainty grice?
Dance, Katie Beardie!
Katie Beardie had a hen,
Cackled but and cackled ben,
Wasna that a dainty hen?
Dance, Katie Beardie!'

And you little ones have been 'cackling but and cackling ben' ever since breakfast time. Do, children, go upstairs, like good bairns, and stay awhile."

Tess and Dot understood a good deal of Mrs. MacCall's Scotch, for they heard it daily. But now she had to explain that a "grice" was a pig and that "but" and "ben" meant in and out. But even Sammy knew how to "count out" in Scotch, for they had long since learned Mrs. MacCall's doggerel for games.

Now they played hide and seek, using one of the counting-out rhymes the housekeeper had taught them:

Eenerty, feenerty, fickerty, faig,
Ell, dell, domen, aig.
Irky, birky, story rock,
Ann, tan, touzelt Jock.

And then Sammy disappeared! It was Dot's turn to be "it," and she counted one hundred five times by the method approved, saying very rapidly: "Ten, ten, double-ten, forty-five and fifteen!" Then she began to hunt.

She found Tess in the wardrobe in the hall which led to the other ell of the big house. But Sammy! Why, it was just as though he had flown right out of existence!

Tess was soon curious, too, and aided her sister in the search, and they hunted the three floors of the old Corner House, and it did not seem as though any small boy could be small enough to hide in half the places into which the girls looked for Sammy Pinkney!

Dot was a persistent and faithful searcher after more things than one. If there was anything she really wanted, or wanted to know, she always stuck to it until she had accomplished her end—or driven everybody else in the house, as Agnes said, into spasms.

With her Alice-doll hugged in the crook of one arm—the Alice-doll was her chiefest treasure—Dot hunted high and low for the elusive Sammy Pinkney. Of course, occasional household happenings interfered with the search; but Dot took up the quest again as soon as these little happen-

ings were over, for Sammy still remained in hiding.

For instance, Alfredia Blossom and one of her brothers came with the family wash in a big basket with which they had struggled through the snowdrifts. Of course they had to be taken into the kitchen and warmed and fed on seed cookies. The little boy began to play with Mainsheet, one of the cats, but Alfredia, the little girls took upstairs with them in their continued hunt for Sammy.

"Wha' fur all dis traipsin' an' traipsin' up dese stairs?" demanded a deep and unctious voice from the dark end of the hall where the uncarpeted stairs rose to the garret landing.

"Oh, Uncle Rufus!" chorused the little white girls, and:

"Howdy, Gran'pop?" said Alfredia, her face one broad grin.

"Well, if dat ain' de beatenes'!" declared the aged negro who was the Kenways' man-of-all-work. "Heah you chillen is behin' me, an' I sho' thought yo' all mus' be on ahaid of me. I sho' did!"

"Why, no, Uncle Rufus; *here* we are," said Dot.

"I see yo' is, honey. I see yo'," he returned, chuckling gleefully. "How's Pechunia, Alfredia? Spry?"

"Yes, sir," said his grandchild, bobbing her head on which the tightly braided "pigtails" stood

out like the rays of a very black sun. "Mammy's all right."

"But who's been trackin' up all dese stairs, if 'twasn't yo' chillen?" demanded the negro, returning to the source of his complaint. "Snow jes' eberywhere! Wha's dat Sam Pinkney?" he added suddenly.

"We don't know, Uncle Rufus," said Tess slowly.

"Sammy went and hid from us, and we can't find him," explained Dot.

Uncle Rufus pointed a gnarled finger dramatically at a blob of snow on the carpet at the foot of the garret stairs.

"Dah he is!" he exclaimed.

"Oh!" gasped Tess.

"Where, Uncle Rufus?" begged Dorothy, somewhat startled.

"Fo' de lan's sake!" murmured Alfredia, her eyes shining. "He mus' a done melted most away."

"Dah's his feetsteps, chillen," declared the old man. "An' dey come all de way up de two flights from de back do'. I been gadderin' up lumps o' snow in dis here shovel—"

He halted with a sharp intake of breath, and raised his head to look up the garret stairs. It was very dark up there, for the door that opened into the great, open room extending the full width of the main part of the old Corner House was closed. In winter the children seldom went up

there to play; and Uncle Rufus never mounted to the garret at all if he could help it.

"What's dat?" he suddenly whispered.

"Tap, tap, tap; tap, tap, tap!" went the sound that had caught the old man's attention. It receded, then drew nearer, then receded. Uncle Rufus turned a face that had suddenly become gray toward the three little girls.

"Dat's—dat's de same noise used to be up in dat garret befo' your Unc' Stower die, chillen. Ma mercy me!"

"Oh!" squealed Alfredia, turning to run. "Dat's de garret ghos'! I's heard ma mammy tell 'bout dat ol' ha'nt."

But Tess seized her and would not let her go.

"That is perfect nonsense, Alfredia!" she said very sternly. "There is no such thing as a ghost."

"Don' you be too uppity, chile!" murmured Uncle Rufus.

"A ghost!" cried Dot, coming nearer to the attic stairs. "Oh, my! What I thought was a goat when I was a very little girl? I remember!"

"Dat's jest de same noise," murmured Uncle Rufus, as the tapping sound was repeated.

"But Ruthie laid that old ghost," said Tess with scorn. "And it wasn't anything—much. But this—"

Dot, who had examined the wet marks and lumps of snow on the lower treads of the garret stairs, suddenly squealed:

"Oh, looky here! 'Tisn't a ghost, but 'tis a goat! Those are Billy Bumps' footsteps! Of course they are!"

"Sammy Pinkney!" was the chorus of voices, even Uncle Rufus joining in. Then he added:

"Dat boy is de beatenes'! How come he make dat goat climb all dese stairs?"

"Why," said Dot, "Billy Bumps can climb right up on the roof of the hen houses. He can climb just like a—a—well, just like a goat! Coming upstairs isn't anything hard for Billy Bumps."

"Sammy Pinkney, you come down from there with that goat!" commanded Tess sternly. "What do you suppose Ruthie or Mrs. MacCall will say?"

The door swung open above, and the wan daylight which entered by the small garret windows revealed Sammy Pinkney, plump, sturdy and freckled, stooping to look down at the startled group at the top of the stairs.

"I spy Sammy!" cried Dot shrilly, just remembering that they were playing hide and seek —or had been.

But somebody else spied Sammy at that moment, too. The mischievous boy had led Billy Bumps, the goat, up three long flights of stairs and turned him loose to go tap, tap, tapping about the bare attic floor on his hard little hoofs.

Billy spied Sammy as the youth stooped to grin down the stairs at Uncle Rufus and the little girls. Billy had a hair-trigger temper. He did not rec-

ognize Sammy from the rear, and he instantly charged.

Just as Sammy was going to tell those below how happy he was because he had startled them, Billy Bumps dashed out of the garret and butted the unsuspicious boy. Sammy sailed right into the air, arms and legs spread like a jumping frog, and dived down the stairway, while Billy stood blatting and shaking his horns at the head of the flight.

CHAPTER II

THE STRAW RIDE

Uncle Rufus and Alfredia had fallen back from the foot of the stairs under the impression that it was the garret ghost, rather than the garret goat, that was charging the mischievous Sammy Pinkney. And the two smallest Corner House girls were much too small to catch Sammy in full flight.

So it certainly would have gone hard with that youngster had not other and more able hands intervened. There was a shout from behind Uncle Rufus, an echoing bark, and a lean boy with a big dog dashed into the forefront of this exciting adventure.

The boy, if tall and slender, was muscular enough. Indeed, Neale O'Neil was a trained athlete, having begun his training very young indeed with his uncle, Mr. William Sorber, of Twomley and Sorber's Herculean Circus and Menagerie. As the big Newfoundland dog charged upstairs to hold back the goat, Neale, with outspread arms, met Sammy in mid-air.

Neale staggered back, clutching the small boy, and finally tripped and fell on the carpet of the hall. But he was not hurt, nor was Sammy.

"Fo' de good lan' sake!" gasped Uncle Rufus, "what is we a-comin' to? A goat in de attic, an' —Tessie! yo' call off dat dog or he'll eat Billy Bumps, complete an' a-plenty!"

The big dog was barking vociferously, while the goat stamped his hoofs and shook his horns threateningly at the head of the flight of stairs. Tom Jonah and Billy Bumps never had been friends.

Tess called the old dog down while Sammy and Neale O'Neil scrambled up from the hall floor. Two older girls appeared, running from the front of the house—a blonde beauty with fluffy, braided hair, and a more sedate brunette who was older than her sister by two years or more.

"What *is* the matter?" demanded the blonde girl. "If this Corner House isn't the noisiest place in Milton—Ruth, see that goat!"

"Well, Sammy!" exclaimed Ruth Kenway, severely, "why didn't you bring Scalawag, the pony, into the house as well? That goat!"

"I was goin' to," confessed the rather abashed Sammy. "But I didn't have time."

"Don't you ever do such a thing again, Sammy Pinkney!" ordered Ruth, severely.

She had to be severe. Otherwise the younger ones would have completely overrun the old Corner House and made it unlivable for more sedate and quiet folk.

The responsibility for the welfare of her three sisters and that of Aunt Sarah Maltby, who lived

with them, had early fallen on Ruth Kenway's shoulders. In a much larger city than Milton the Kenways had lived in a very poor tenement and had had a hard struggle to get along on a small pension, their mother and father both being dead, until Mr. Howbridge, administrator of Uncle Peter Stower's estate, had looked the sisters up.

At that time there was some uncertainty as to whom the old Corner House, standing opposite the Parade Ground in Milton, and the rest of the Stower property belonged; for Uncle Peter Stower had died, and his will could not be found. That there was a will, Mr. Howbridge knew, for he had drawn it for the miserly old man who had lived alone with his colored servant, Uncle Rufus, in the old Corner House for so long.

The surrogate, however, finally allowed the guardian of the Kenway sisters to place them in the roomy old house, with their aunt and with Mrs. MacCall as housekeeper, while the court tangle was straightened out. This last was satisfactorily arranged, as related in the first book of this series, entitled "The Corner House Girls."

In successive volumes are related in detail the adventures of the four sisters and their friends since their establishment in the old Corner House, telling of their adventures at school, in a summer camp at the seashore, of their taking part in a school play, of the odd find made in the old Cor-

"Even Ruth could scarcely keep a sober face."

ner House garret, and on an automobile tour through the State.

In that sixth volume of the series the Kenways met Luke and Cecile Shepard, brother and sister, who prove to be delightful friends, especially to Ruth. Agnes, the second Kenway, already had a faithful chum and companion in Neale O'Neil. But in Luke, Ruth found a most charming acquaintance, and in the seventh book, "The Corner House Girls Growing Up," the friendship of Ruth and Luke is cemented by a series of incidents that try both of their characters.

Of course, each month saw the four sisters that many days older. They were actually growing up —"growing out of aye ken!" Mrs. MacCall often said. Just the same, they still liked fun and frolic and, especially the younger ones, were just as likely to play pranks as ever.

Even Ruth could scarcely keep a sober face when she looked now from Sammy Pinkney's rueful countenance to the goat shaking his head at the top of the garret stairs.

"Now," she said as severely as possible, "I would like to know how you intend to get him down again."

"More than that, Sam," said Neale: "How did you ever get him up there?"

"Oh, that was easy!" declared the small boy, his confident grin returning to his freckled face. "I got a stick and tied to it one of those old cab-

bages that Uncle Rufus has got packed away under the shed. Then," went on the inventive genius, "I went behind Billy and pushed, holding the cabbage ahead of his nose. Say, that goat would walk up the side of a house, let alone three flights of stairs, for a cabbage!"

"Can you beat him?" murmured Neale, vastly delighted by this confession.

"I feel sometimes as though I would like to beat him," answered Ruth. "See if you can get Billy Bumps out to his proper quarters, Neale."

But that was not easy, and it took an hour's work and finally the tying of Billy Bumps "hand and foot" before the sturdy goat was overcome and returned to his pen.

By this time, however, the snow had stopped. Lunch was served in the big Corner House dining-room, Neale and Sammy being guests.

It was an hilarious meal, of course. With such a crowd of young folks about the table—and on Saturday, too!—a sedate time was not possible. But Ruth tried to keep the younger ones from talking too loud or being too careless in their table manners.

Aunt Sarah Maltby, sitting at one end of the table, shook her head solemnly about midway of the meal at Sammy Pinkney.

"Young man," she said in her severest way, "what do you suppose will become of you? You are the most mischievous boy I have ever seen—and I have seen a good many in my time."

"Yes'm," said Sammy, hanging his head, for he was afraid of Aunt Sarah.

"You should think of the future," admonished the old lady. "There is something besides fun in this world."

"Yes'm," again came from the abashed, if not repentant, Sammy.

"Think what you might make of yourself, young man, if you desired. Do you realize that every boy born in this country has a chance to be president?"

"Huh?" ejaculated Sammy, suddenly looking up. "Be president, Miss Maltby? Huh! I tell you what: I'll sell you my chance for a quarter."

The irrepressible laugh from the other young folks that followed might have offended Aunt Sarah had not the front door bell rung at that very moment. Agnes, who was nearest, and much quicker than rheumatic Uncle Rufus, ran to answer the summons.

"Oh, Ruthie!" her clear voice instantly sounded as far as the dining-room, "here's Mr. Howbridge's man, and he's got a great big sleigh at the gate, and— Why, there's Mr. Howbridge himself!"

Not only the oldest Kenway ran to join her sister at the door, but all the other young folks trooped out. They forgot their plates at the announcement of the appearance of the girls' guardian.

"Did you e'er see such bairns before?" de-

manded the housekeeper of Aunt Sarah. "They have neither appetite nor manners on a Saturday!"

In the big front hall the girls and boys were delightedly greeting Mr. Howbridge, while the coachman plowed back to the gate through the snow to hold the frisky pair of bay horses harnessed to the big pung. Bits of straw clung to the lawyer's clothing, and he was rosy and smiling.

"I did not know but what you would already be out, young folks," Mr. Howbridge announced. "Although I had John harness up just as soon as the weather broke."

"Oh, Mr. Howbridge," Ruth said, remembering her "manners" after all, "won't you come in?"

"Won't you come out, Miss Ruth?" responded the man, laughing.

"Oh! *Oh!* OH!" cried Tess, in crescendo, peering out of the open door. "That sleigh of Mr. Howbridge's is full of straw."

"A straw-ride!" gasped Agnes, clasping her hands. "Oh, Mr. Howbridge! have you come to take us out?"

"Of course. All of you. The more the merrier," said their guardian, who was very fond indeed of his wards and their young friends, and missed no chance to give them pleasure.

At that statement there was a perfect rout while the young people ran for their wraps and overshoes. The dessert was forgotten, although

it was Mrs. MacCall's famous "whangdoodle pudding and lallygag sauce."

"Never mind the eats now, Mrs. Mac!" cried Agnes, struggling into her warm coat. "Have an extra big dinner. We'll come home to-night as hungry as crows—see if we don't!"

In ten minutes the whole party, the four Kenway sisters, Neale, and Sammy, and Tom Jonah, had tumbled into the body of the big sleigh which was so heaped with clean straw that they burrowed right into it just like mice! The big bay horses were eager to start, and tossed their heads and made the little silver bells on the harness jingle to a merry tune indeed.

Mr. Howbridge and Ruth sat up on the wide front seat—the only seat—with the driver, John. The guardian wished to talk in private with the oldest Kenway girl. He considered her a very bright girl, with a very well-balanced mind.

While the younger folks shouted and joked and snowballed each other as the horses sped along the almost unbroken track, Ruth and her guardian were quite seriously engaged in conversation.

"I want to get some good advice from you, Miss Ruth Kenway," said the lawyer, smiling sideways at her. "I know that you have an abundant supply."

"You are a flatterer," declared the girl, her eyes sparkling nevertheless. She was always proud to be taken into his confidence. "Is it something about the estate?"

"No, my dear. Nothing about the Stower estate."

"I was afraid we might be spending too much money," said the girl, laughing. "You know, I do think we are extravagant."

"Not in your personal expenditures," answered their guardian. "Only in the Kenways' charities do I sometimes feel like putting on the brake. But this," he added, "is something different."

"What is it, Mr. Howbridge? I am sure I shall be glad to help you if I can," Ruth said earnestly.

"Well, now, Miss Ruth," said the lawyer, a quizzical smile wreathing his lips. "What would you do, for instance, if a pair of twins had been left to you?"

CHAPTER III

TWINS—AND TROUBLE

Sometimes Mr. Howbridge called her "Martha," because she was so cumbered with family cares. Sometimes he called her "Minerva," and acclaimed her to be wise. He so frequently joked with her in this way that Ruth Kenway was not at all sure the lawyer was in earnest on this occasion.

"Twins?" she repeated, smiling up at him over the top of her muff. "Twin *what?* Twin puppies, or kittens, or even fish? I suppose there are twin fish?"

"You joke me, and I am serious," he said, while the younger ones shouted and sang amid the straw behind. "I really have had a pair of twins given to me. I am their guardian, the administrator of their estate, just as I was made administrator of the Stower estate and guardian of you girls. It is no joke, I assure you," and he finished rather ruefully.

"Goodness me! you don't mean it?" cried Ruth.

"Yes, I do. I mean it very much. I do, indeed, think it rather mean. If all my friends who die and go to a better world leave me their children to take care of, I shall be in a worse pickle

than the Little Old Woman Who Lived in the Shoe."

"Like old Mrs. Bobster at Pleasant Cove," laughed Ruth. "But even she did not have twins. And if your new family is as troublesome as the Corner House crowd, what will you ever do?"

"That is what I am asking you, Minerva," he said seriously. "What would you do if you had had twins left to you?"

"What are they, Mr. Howbridge? Boys or girls?"

"Both."

"Both? Oh! You mean one is a boy and one is a girl."

"Ralph and Rowena Birdsall."

"That is better than having two of either sex, I should say," Ruth observed with more gravity. "They sort of—sort of balance each other."

"I guess they are 'some kids,' as our friend Neale would say," suddenly laughed Mr. Howbridge. "I knew Birdsall very well. I might say we were very close friends, both socially and in business. Poor fellow! The last two years of his life were very sad indeed."

"Has he left plenty for the twins?" asked Ruth.

"More than 'plenty,'" said Mr. Howbridge. "He was very, very wealthy. Ralph and Rowena will come into very large fortunes when they are of age. The money is well invested."

"Then you need not worry about that," Ruth said sedately.

"No? The more money, the more worry for the administrator and guardian," Mr. Howbridge said succinctly. "I can assure you that is true. But it is what to do for, and with, the twins themselves that bothers me most just at first."

"How old are they?"

"About twelve. Nice age! All legs and arms and imagination."

"Dear me! Do you know them well?"

"Haven't seen them since they were two little red mites in their cradle."

"Then you merely imagine they are so very terrible."

"I heard enough about them from Frank, Frank Birdsall. That was their father's name. He used to be very fond of talking about them. Proud as Lucifer, he was, of Ralph and Rowena. And his wife—"

"Oh! Of course, the mother is dead, too."

"That was what killed Frank, I verily believe," said Mr. Howbridge gravely. "She died two years ago at a camp he owned up near the Canadian border. Red Deer Lodge it is called. Mrs. Birdsall was flung from her horse.

"It crushed her husband. He brought the children away from there (they had spent much of their time up in the wilderness, for they loved it) and never went back again.

"That's another piece of work he's left me. Because he did not want ever to see the Lodge again, I have to go up there—now, in mid-winter

—and attend to something that's been hanging fire too long already. It is a nuisance."

"A camp in the woods in mid-winter must be an enjoyable place," Ruth said thoughtfully. "You can take your guns; and you can snowshoe; can skate; maybe—"

"And, as our good Mrs. Mac would say, eat fried snowballs and icicle soup!" finished Mr. Howbridge. "Ugh! It's a fine place, Red Deer Lodge, but I shall take only my man and we'll have to depend on some old guide or trapper to do for us. No, I look forward to no pleasant time at Red Deer Lodge, I assure you."

This conversation was not carried on in sequence. The party in the body of the sleigh frequently interrupted. Sammy managed to dance all over the sleigh, and half a dozen times he was on the point of pitching out into the drifts.

"Let him!" snapped Agnes at last. "Let him be buried in the snow, and we won't stop for him —not until we come back."

"The poor kid would be an icicle then," objected Neale O'Neil.

"And he'd miss the nice hot chocolate and buns Mr. Howbridge says we are to have at Crowder's Inn," put in Tess, the thoughtful.

Dot squeezed her Alice-doll close to her little bosom and made up her mind that that precious possession should not pop out by accident into a drift and be left behind.

"I don't suppose I should have brought her,"

Dot confessed to Tess. "I should have given the sailor-boy baby an airing instead."

"Oh, yes! Nosmo King Kenway," murmured her sister.

Dot hurried on, ignoring the suggestive name of the sailor-boy baby who had been inadvertently christened after a sign on a barn door.

"You know," the smallest Corner House girl said, "Alice's complexion is so delicate. Of course, Neale had her all made over in the doll's hospital; but I am always afraid that the wind will crack it."

"I wouldn't worry so about her, Dot," advised Tess.

"You would if Alice were your baby," declared Dot. "And you know she is delicate. She's never been the same since Lillie Treble buried her with the dried apples in our back yard."

Meanwhile Neale O'Neil had caught a sentence or two flung back by the wind from the high front seat. He bobbed up between Mr. Howbridge and Ruth.

"What's all this about red deer, and snowshoes, and eating icicle soup?" he asked. "Sounds awfully interesting. Are you planning to go hunting, Mr. Howbridge?"

"I've got to go to a hunting lodge, clear up state, my boy," said the lawyer. "And I dread it just as much as you young folks would enjoy it."

"It would be fine, I think," murmured Ruth.

"Oh, bully!" shouted Agnes, suddenly standing up in the straw and clinging to Neale for support. "To a regular, sure-enough winter camp? Then Carrie and Lucy Poole, and Trix Severn can't crow over us any more! They went, last year, to Letterbeg Camp, up beyond Hoosac."

"But, goodness, Agnes, wait till we are asked, do!" admonished Ruth. "I never saw or heard of such precipitate young ones."

"Young one yourself!" grumbled Agnes.

"It's my fault," said the good-natured Neale. "Aggie misunderstood what I said."

"No need to worry about it," said Mr. Howbridge cheerfully. "If you young folks really want to come with me—"

"Oh, Mr. Howbridge!" exclaimed Ruth, in a tone that showed she, herself, had been much taken with the idea.

"Why, I hate to go alone. I can send up some servants to open the Lodge. Frank was always begging me to make use of it. After Mrs. Birdsall was killed he never would go near the place, as I said. Though I believe the twins, Ralph and Rowena, have been up there with a care-taker and a governess, or somebody to look out for them."

"Where are they now?" asked Ruth.

"The Birdsall place in Arlington was closed soon after Frank died, three months ago. His old butler and his wife live in a nice home near by, and they have the children and their governess with them."

"With just servants?" murmured Ruth.

"They are very suitable people," declared Mr. Howbridge, as though he felt the faint criticism in the girl's words. "I went myself and saw Rodgers and Mrs. Rodgers. The governess and the twins were out for a drive, so I did not see them."

"The poor things!" sighed Ruth.

"My!" exclaimed Agnes, "those children are worse off than we Kenways were. They haven't got anybody like Ruth, Mr. Howbridge."

"That is true," agreed the lawyer. "But what am I to do? Separate them? Send them to boarding school—the boy one way and the girl another?"

"Gee! that would be tough, Mr. Howbridge," declared Neale O'Neil, with considerable feeling for the unfortunate twins.

"I don't see what I'm to do," complained the lawyer.

"They should have a real home," Ruth stated, with some severity. "Sending them to boarding school is dodging the issue. So is leaving them wholly in the care of servants."

"Who would take in two tearing and wearing children, twelve years old?" demanded Mr. Howbridge, on the defensive.

"Perhaps the fault does go back to the parents—to the father, at least," admitted Ruth. "He should have made provision for his children before he died."

"I suppose you think the duty devolves upon me," said Mr. Howbridge, rather grumpily. "Should I take them into my house? Should I break up the habits of years for two half-wild children?"

"Oh, I don't know that," Ruth told him brightly. "It's one of those things one must decide for oneself, isn't it?"

There was not much more said after that during the ride about the twins, Ralph and Rowena Birdsall. But Red Deer Lodge!

The idea of going to a real camp in winter was taken up by everybody in the party, for even Tom Jonah barked. In the depths of the wilderness, with wild woods, and wild animals, and perhaps wild men! (this in Sammy's mind) all about the Lodge! The freckled boy considered the idea even superior to his long cherished desire to run away to be a pirate.

"I'll get me a bow-arrer and learn to shoot before we start," Sammy declared, deluding himself, as he always did, with the idea that he was to be a member of the party in any case.

"But you don't even know if your mother'll let you go, Sammy Pinkney!" cried Tess.

"She'll let me go if Aggie says I may," declared Sammy. "I can, can't I, Aggie?" grabbing her by her plaid skirt and almost pulling her over backwards.

"Stop! You can can that!" declared the next-to-the-oldest Corner House girl slangily. "What

do you think I am—a bell rope, that you yank me that way?"

"I can go to that Red Deer Lodge, can't I?" insisted the youngster.

"You can start right now, for all I care," said Agnes, rather grumpily, and giving Sammy no further attention.

But that was enough for Sammy Pinkney. He considered that he had a particular invitation to accompany the party into the woods, and he would tell his mother so when he reached home.

But Dot began to be worried.

"Just see here, Tess Kenway!" she exclaimed suddenly. "Do you suppose my Alice-doll—or any of the other dollies—can stand it?"

"Stand what?" her sister, quite excited, asked.

"Living in tents in winter?"

"In what tents?" asked the amazed Tess.

"Up there at Red Darling Camp—"

"Red *Deer!*"

"Well, I knew it was some nice word," Dot, undisturbed, said. "But Alice is so delicate."

"Why, Dot Kenway! we won't have to live in tents," said Tess.

"We did in that other camp we went to," said the smaller girl. "Don't you 'member? And the tent 'most blowed over one night, and you and I and Tom Jonah went sailing in a boat? And that clam man—"

"But, Dot!" cried Tess, "that was a summer camp. This is a winter one. And it's all made

of logs, and there are doors and windows and fireplaces and—and everything!"

"Oh!" murmured Dot. "I wondered how they'd keep Jack Frost out. And he's stinging my ears right now, Tess Kenway."

The roadside inn was in sight now, and presently the big sleigh pulled up before it with the bells jangling and the horses steaming, as Dot remarked, "just as though they had boiling water in 'em and the smoke was leaking out."

The whole party ran into the grillroom and chased Jack Frost away with hot chocolate and cakes. There the idea of going to Red Deer Lodge for the Christmas holidays was well thrashed out.

"Of course, I will send up my own servants and supplies. Being administrator of the estate, there will be no question of my using the Lodge as I see fit," Mr. Howbridge said cheerfully. "And I shall be delighted to have you young folks with me.

"I am really going to confer with an old timber cruiser about the standing timber contracted for by the Neven Lumber Company before Frank Birdsall died. This timber cruiser—"

"It sounds like a sea-story!" interrupted Agnes, roguishly.

"What is a timber cruiser?" demanded Ruth, quite as puzzled as her sister.

"It is not a 'what' but a 'who,'" laughed Mr. Howbridge. "In his way, Ike M'Graw is quite a famous character up there. A timber cruiser

is a man who knows timber so well that just by walking through a wood lot and looking he can number and mark down the trees that are sound and will make good timber.

"Ike has written me through a friend (for the old man cannot use a pen himself, save to make his cross) that he has been over the entire Birdsall estate and that his figures and the figures of the Nevens people are too far apart. I fear that the lumber company is trying to put something over on me, and as administrator of the estate I must look out for the twins' interests."

"You are more careful of their money, Mr. Howbridge, than you are of the twins themselves, are you not?" Ruth suggested, in a low voice.

"Now, don't tell me that!" he cried. "I really cannot take those children into my house."

"Well, you know," she told him, smiling, "you brought this on yourself by asking my advice. And you intend to fill that Lodge up there with us 'young ones.' "

"But I shall have you to manage for me, Miss Ruth," declared the lawyer. "That is different."

"Perhaps we might take the twins along with us, and you'd get used to them," Ruth said. "You say they like it up there in the wilderness."

"Frank said they were crazy about it."

"Well?"

"You don't know what you are letting yourselves in for. Ralph and Rowena are young savages."

"Can't be much worse than Sammy, yonder," chuckled Neale, who, with Agnes, was much interested in this part of the planning.

"Oh, Ruthie!" exclaimed the second Kenway sister suddenly, clasping her hands. "There's Cecile and Luke!"

"Where—what—?"

"I mean we invited them to come to the Corner House for the holidays."

"Ah-ha!" exclaimed Mr. Howbridge promptly. "The Shepards? Of course! I had already included them—in my mind."

"Mr. Howbridge! It will be more than a party. It will be a convention," gasped Ruth.

"It's such a lonely place that we'll need a big crowd to make it worth while going at all," the lawyer laughed. "Yes. Cecile and Luke are invited. I will have them written to at once—in addition to your own invitation to them, Miss Ruth."

"Dear me! you are just the best guardian, Mr. Howbridge," sighed Agnes ecstatically.

"And I think," Ruth added, "that you ought to think seriously of taking the Birdsall twins with us."

That was not decided at that time, however. And when the party got back to the old Corner House, just across from the Parade Ground at the head of Main Street, Mr. Howbridge was met with a piece of news that shocked him much more

than had the thought of the twins making their home with him in his quiet bachelor residence.

A clerk from the lawyer's office awaited Mr. Howbridge. There was a telegram from Rodgers, the Birdsalls' ex-butler. It read:

"Ralph and Rowena away since yesterday noon. Hospitals searched. Cannot have pond dragged. Two feet of ice. Wire instructions.—Rodgers."

CHAPTER IV

ANTICIPATIONS

Mr. Howbridge, before he hurried away to his office, asked Ruth:

"What do you think of that? And you suggest my keeping those twins—those two wild youngsters—in my home!"

"I will tell you what I think of that telegram," said the oldest Kenway girl, handing the yellow sheet of paper back to him. "I think that man Rodgers is not a fit person to have charge of the boy and girl."

"Why not?" he asked in surprise.

"Imagine thinking of dragging a pond in midwinter—or at any other time of the year—for two healthy children! First idea the man seems to have. I guess the twins had reason for running away."

"Hear! Hear!" cried Agnes, who deliberately listened.

"Why, they have known Rodgers all their lives!"

"Perhaps that is why they have run away," said Ruth, smiling. "Rodgers sounds to me—from his telegram—as though he had one awful lack."

"You frighten me. What lack?"

"Lack of a sense of humor. And that is fatal in the character of anybody who has a pair of twins on his hands."

Mr. Howbridge threw up his own hands in amazement. "I must lack that myself," he said. "I see nothing funny, at least, in the idea of having Ralph and Rowena Birdsall in my house."

"It helps," said Ruth. "A sense of humor is what has kept me going all these years," she added demurely. "If you think a pair of twins can be compared to Tess and Dot and Sammy Pinkney—to say nothing of Aggie and Neale—"

"Oh! Oh!" shouted the two latter in chorus.

"You have a mean mind, Ruthie Kenway," declared the blonde beauty.

"I knew I wasn't much liked," admitted Neale O'Neil. "But that is the unkindest cut of all."

"You have had experience, I grant you," said Mr. Howbridge, about to take his departure. "But I foresee much trouble in the case of these Birdsall twins."

And he was a true prophet there. The twins had utterly disappeared. The Arlington police—indeed, all the county officers together—could find no trace of the orphaned brother and sister.

Mr. Howbridge put private detectives on the case. The twins seemed to have disappeared as utterly as though they really were under the two feet of ice on Arlington Pond.

The lawyer searched personally, advertised in

the newspapers, and even offered a reward for the apprehension of the children. A fortnight passed without success.

The governess, Miss Mason, was discharged, for it seemed unnecessary to pay her salary when there were no children for her to teach. Rodgers and his wife could give no aid in the search. They were rather relieved, if the truth were told, to be free of the twins.

"Master Ralph was hard enough to get along with," the ex-butler admitted. "But Miss Rowena was worse. They wanted to go back into their own house to live. They could not understand why it was shut up, sir," and the old serving man shook his head.

"They seemed to have taken a dislike to you, sir," he added to Mr. Howbridge. "They said you 'hadn't any right to boss.' That is the way they put it."

"But I never even saw them," returned the lawyer. "I didn't try 'to boss' them."

"Well, you know, sir," Rodgers explained, "I had to give 'em reasons for things. You have to with children like Master Ralph and Miss Rowena. So I had to tell 'em you said they were to do this and that."

"Oh! Ah! I see!" muttered the guardian.

He began to believe that perhaps Ruth Kenway was right. He should have taken more of a personal interest in Ralph and Rowena. They had evidently gained from the ex-butler an en-

tirely wrong impression of what a guardian was.

But the disappearance of the Birdsall twins did not make any change in the plans for the mid-winter visit to Red Deer Lodge. Mr. Howbridge had to go there in any case, and he would not disappoint the Kenways and their friends.

As it chanced, full three weeks were given the Milton schools at the Christmas Holiday time. There were repairs to make in the heating arrangements of both high and grammar school buildings. The schools would close the week before Christmas and not open again until the week following New Year's Day.

If Sammy Pinkney had had his way, the schools would never have opened again!

"I don't see what they have to learn you things for, anyway," complained the youngster. "You can find things out for yourself."

"That's rather an expensive way to learn, I've always heard," said Ruth, admonishingly.

"Huh!" grumbled Sammy, "teachers don't know much, anyway. Look! There's what Miss Grimsby told us in physics the other day—all about what you're made of, and how you're made, and the names you can call yourself—if you want to.

"You know: Your legs and arms are *limbs*—and all that. She told us the middle part of our bodies is the *trunk*, and she asked us all if we understood that. Some said 'yes,' and some didn't say nothing," went on the excited boy.

"'Don't you know the middle of the body is the trunk?' she asked Patsy Roach. And what do you suppose he told Miss Grimsby?"

"I can't imagine," said Agnes, for this was in the evening and the young people were gathered about the sitting-room table with their lesson books.

"He told her: 'You ought to go to the circus, Miss Grimsby, and see the elephant,'" giggled Sammy. "And I guess Patsy was right. Huh! *Trunk!*" he added with scorn.

"Association of ideas," chuckled Neale O'Neil, who was likewise present as usual during home study hour. "I heard that one of the kids in Dot's grade gave Miss Andrews an extremely bright answer the other day."

"What was that, Neale?" asked Agnes, who would rather talk than study at any time.

"History. Miss Andrews asked one little girl who discovered America, and the answer was, 'Ohio'!"

"Oh! Oh!" murmured Agnes, while even Ruth smiled.

"Yes," chuckled Neale. "Miss Andrews said, 'No; Columbus discovered America,' and the kid said: 'Yes'm. That was his first name.'"

"She got her geography and history mixed," said Ruth, smiling.

"That was Sadie Goronofsky's half-sister, Becky," explained Dot. "She isn't very bright."

"You bet she isn't bright!" snorted Sammy

Pinkney. "Her pop's got a little tailor shop with another man down on Meadow Street, and they are always fighting."

"Who are always fighting?" asked Neale quizzically. "Becky and her father or Becky and her father's partner?"

"Smartie! Becky's pop and the other man," answered Sammy. "And their landlord was putting in a new store-front, and Becky's father put out a sign telling folks they were still working—*you* know. Becky said it read: 'Business going on during altercations,' instead of 'alterations.' And 'altercations' means fights," concluded the wise Sammy.

"Just see," remarked Ruth quietly, "how satisfied you children should be that you know so much more than your little mates. You so frequently bring home tales about them."

"Aw, now, Ruth," mumbled Sammy, who was bright enough to note her characteristic criticism.

"I would try," the oldest Kenway said admonishingly, "to bring home only the pleasant stories about my little school friends."

"Oh! *I* know a nice story about Allie Newman's little brother," declared Dot eagerly.

"That little terror!" murmured Agnes.

"He is one tough little kid," admitted Neale O'Neil, in an undertone.

"What about the little Newman boy?" asked Ruth indulgently. "And then we must all study."

"Why," said Dot, big-eyed and very much in

earnest, "you know Robbie Newman doesn't go to school yet; and he's an awful trial to his mother."

"That is gossip, Dot," Tess interposed severely.

But the smallest Corner House girl was not to be derailed from the main line of her story, and went right on:

"He was naughty the other day and his mamma told him she'd shut him up somewhere all by himself. 'If you do, Mamma,' he said, 'I'll just smash ev'rything in the room.' "

"Oh-oo!" gasped Tess, proving herself to be quite as much interested in the "gossip" as the others around the evening lamp. "What a wicked boy!"

"But he didn't smash anything," Dot was quick to explain. "For his mother put him right out in the henhouse."

"The henhouse! Fancy!" said Agnes.

"There wasn't anything for him to smash there," said Dot. "But when she had locked him in, Robbie put his head out of the little door where the hens go in and out, and he called after her:

" 'Mamma, you can lock me in here all you want to; but I won't lay any eggs!' "

"I am not sure that it isn't gossip," chuckled Agnes, when the general laugh had subsided.

"That will be all now," Ruth said with severity. "Study time is here."

But there was another and more important sub-

ject in all their minds than either school happenings, the eccentricities of their friends, or the lesson books themselves.

The holidays! The thought of going to Red Deer Lodge! A winter vacation in the deep woods, and to live in "picnic" fashion, as they supposed, lent a charm to the plan that delighted every member of the Corner House party.

Ruth and Agnes wrote to the Shepards—to Cecile at home with her Aunt Lorena, and to Luke at college—and they were immediately enamored of the plan and returned enthusiastic acceptances of the invitation, thanking Mr. Howbridge, of course, as well.

The lawyer was having a great deal to do at this time, and he came to the old Corner House more than once to talk about the Birdsall twins to Ruth and the others. As he said, it gave him comfort to talk over something he did not know anything about with the oldest Corner House sister.

He sat one stormy day in the cozy sitting-room, with Dot and the Alice-doll on one knee and Tess and Almira, who was now a quite grown-up cat and had kittens of her own, on his other knee. All the Corner House cats were pets, no matter how grown-up they were.

"It is worrying me a great deal, Ruthie," he said to the sympathetic girl. "Look at a day like this. We don't know where those poor children are. Rodgers says they could have had but little

money. In fact, they scarcely knew what money was for, having always had everything needful supplied them."

"Twelve-year-old children nowadays, Mr. Howbridge," said Ruth, "are usually quite capable of looking after themselves."

"You think so?" queried the worried guardian.

"You remember what Agnes was at twelve. And look at our Tess."

The lawyer pinched Tess' cheek. "I see what she is. And she is going to be twelve some day, I suppose," he agreed. "But what would she and—say—Sammy Pinkney do, turned out alone into the world?"

"Oh!" cried Dot, the little pitcher with the big ears, "Sammy and I went off alone to be pirates. And I'm younger than Tess."

"I hope I shouldn't run away with Sammy!" said Tess, in some disdain.

"Why," Dot put in, "suppose Sammy was your brother? I felt quite sisterly to him that time we were hid in the canalboat."

"I guess that we all feel 'sisterly' to Sammy," laughed Ruth. "And I am sure, Tess, you would know what to do if you were away from home with him."

"I guess I would," agreed Tess severely. "I'd march him right back again."

The lawyer joined in the laugh. But he was none the less anxious about Ralph and Rowena Birdsall. There was an undercurrent of feeling

in his mind, too, that he had been derelict in his duty toward his wards.

"Three months after their father died, and I had not seen them," he said more than once. "I blame myself. As you say, Ruth, I should have won their confidence in that time."

"Oh, Mr. Howbridge, you are not to blame for that! You are unused to children, anyway."

"But it was selfishness on my part—arrant selfishness. Frank's children should have been my personal care. But, twins!" and he groaned.

One might have been amused by his bachelor horror of the thought of two children in his quiet home; only the situation was really too serious to breed laughter. Two twelve-year-old children striking out into the world for themselves might get into all sorts of mischief and trouble.

The lawyer had done all he could, however, toward recovering the runaways. The police of two States were on the watch for them, and private detectives were likewise hunting for them. The advertisements Mr. Howbridge put in the papers brought no helpful replies. There seemed to be many children wandering about the country, singly and in pairs, but none of them answered at all the description of the Birdsall twins.

Meanwhile the Christmas holidays were approaching. Cecile Shepard arrived at the old Corner House a week ahead of the date set for the closing of school. Luke, however, would join the party at Culberton, at the foot of Long Lake,

nearly at the far end of which, and deep in the woods, was Red Deer Lodge.

Cecile was a very pretty girl, as dark as Agnes was light. She went to school every day with Agnes and sat beside her as a "visitor" during the remainder of the term.

Of course, there was much to do to prepare for this mid-winter venture into the woods. And, too, there were certain plans for Christmas to be carried out by the Corner House girls, whether they were to be at home on Christmas Day or not.

The Stower estate tenants on Meadow Street must not be forgotten.

CHAPTER V

MERRY TIMES

Uncle Peter Stower, in dying and leaving his four grandnieces the Milton property, had left them, in addition (or so Ruth Kenway and her sisters concluded), the duty of overlooking the welfare of certain poor people who occupied the Stower tenements on Meadow Street, over toward the canal.

These tenants were mostly poor people; but Mrs. Kranz, who kept a delicatessen store and grocery, and Joe Maroni, whom Dot said was "both an ice man and a nice man" were two of the tenants who were well-to-do.

Joe Maroni, whose family lived in the corner cellar under Mrs. Kranz's store, sold coal and wood, as well as ice, and had a vegetable and fruit stand on the sidewalk. Mrs. Kranz, the large German woman, was one of the Kenway girls' staunchest friends. Both these shopkeepers were sure to aid the Corner House sisters in their plans for Christmas.

The year before the children of the Stower estate tenants had appeared under the bedroom windows of the old Corner House early on Christmas morning and sung Christmas chants.

"Agnes said, just as though it was in old fuel times," Dot eagerly told Cecile Shepard. "And Aggie wanted to throw large yeast cakes among 'em. You know, like Lady Bountiful did, and—"

"Oh! *Oh!* OH!" gasped Tess, in horror and amazement. "Why will you, Dot, mix up your words so? It wasn't fuel times, it was feudal times."

"And why throw away the yeast cakes?" demanded Cecile, in amused wonder.

"Dear me!" exclaimed Tess, with vast disdain. "She means *largess.* That means gifts. Dot thought it was 'large yeast.' I never did hear of such a child!"

"Well, I don't care!" wailed Dot, who did not like to be taken to task for mispronouncing words, or for other mistakes in English. "I don't think you are at all polite, Tessie Kenway, and I'm going to tell Ruth—so now!"

Which proved that even the little Corner House girls had their little spats. Everything did not always go smoothly.

However, the plans for the entertainment of the Meadow Street families were made without any trouble. It was decided to have a great tree for the whole crowd, and to set it up in a small hall on Meadow Street, where certain lodges held their meetings, the date set for the entertainment being a week in advance of Christmas Eve—the night before the Corner House party was to start for Red Deer Lodge.

Mrs. Kranz took charge of the dressing of the tree, for when she was a child in the old country a Christmas tree was the great annual feast. Not a child among those belonging in the Stower tenements was forgotten—nor the grown folk, either, for that matter.

Tess and Dot did their share in the purchasing of the presents and preparing them for the tree. They both delighted in shopping, and their favorite mart of trade was the five and ten cent store on Main Street.

Such a jumble of things as they bought! The beauty of buying in the five and ten cent store is (or so the children declared) that one can get so much for a dollar.

Every afternoon for a week before the day set for the pre-Christmas celebration, the little folks trudged down to their favorite emporium and came back with their arms laden with a variety of articles to delight the hearts and eyes of the Meadow Street children.

Dolls and dolls' toys were of course Dot's favorite purchases. Tess went in for the more practical things—some to be hung on the tree marked with her own private card for the grown-up members of the expected audience.

In any case, and altogether, there was gathered at the old Corner House to be hung on the Christmas tree for the Meadow Street people a two-bushel basket of little packages, mostly from the five and ten cent store.

Ruth and Agnes saw to it that there were plenty of practical things for the poor children, too: warm coats, caps, leggings, shoes, mittens—a dozen other useful things which would be needed by the younger Goronofskys, the Pedermans, the O'Harras, and all the rest of the conglomerate crew occupying the Stower tenements.

And they had *four* "Santa Clauses"! Although, more properly speaking, they were "the Misses Santa Claus." The Kenway sisters, in the prescribed uniforms of the good St. Nicholas, presided over the distribution of the presents from the illuminated tree.

Dot had every faith in the reality of Santa Claus, nor would her sisters disabuse her of that cheerful belief.

"But, of course," the smallest Corner House girl said, "I know Santa can't be everywhere at once. And this is a week too early for him, anyway. And on Christmas Eve he does have to rush around so to get to everybody's house!

"We're just going to make believe be Santa, Sammy," she explained to that small boy. "And we're not going to be like you were last Christmas, Sammy, and fall down the chimney and frighten everybody so."

"Huh!" grumbled Sammy, to whom his fiasco as a Santa Claus in the old Corner House chimney was a sore subject. "If that old brick hadn't fallen I wouldn't have come down so sudden.

And my mom burned my Santa Claus suit up in the furnace because it was all over soot."

This night in the Meadow Street hall was long to be remembered. Mr. Howbridge made a speech. It was a winter when work was hard to get, and at Ruth's personal request he announced that a dollar a month would be taken off every tenant's rent during the "hard times."

Mrs. Kranz and Joe Maroni, being in so much better circumstances than the majority of the Stower estate tenants, gave many things for the Christmas tree, too. There was candy, and cakes, and popcorn, and nuts for the little folk, and hot drinks and cake and sandwiches for the adults.

Altogether it was a night long to be remembered by the Corner House girls. Even the little ones had begun to understand their duty toward these poor people who helped swell the Kenway family bank account. The estate might not now draw down the fifteen per cent. that Uncle Peter Stower always demanded; but the income from the Meadow Street tenements was considerable, and the tenants were now happier and more content.

"It must be lovely," Cecile Shepard confessed to Ruth and Agnes, "to have so many folks to look out for, and be kind to, and who like you. And Ruthie has such a way with her. I can see the women all admire her."

Agnes began to giggle. "Who wouldn't admire her?" she said. "Ruth believes in helping folks

just the way they want to be helped. She doesn't furnish only flannels and cough sirup to the poor. Oh, no!"

"Now, Agnes!" admonished the older girl, blushing.

"I don't care! It's too good a joke, and it shows just why those people over on Meadow Street worship Ruth," went on the younger sister. "Did you see that biggest Pederman girl? Olga, the one with the white eyebrows and no lashes?"

"Yes," said Cecile. "Her face looks almost like a blank wall."

"And a white-washed wall at that," went on Agnes. "She's a grown woman, but she hasn't any too much intelligence. She was awfully sick with diphtheria last spring, and Ruth went to see her—carrying gifts, of course."

"Things to eat don't much appeal to you when you have diphtheria and can't swallow," put in Ruth.

"I know that," chuckled Agnes. "And what do you think, Cecile? Ruthie asked Olga what she would like to have—if she could get her anything special?

"'Yes, Miss Wuth,' she croaked. Olga can't pronounce her 'R's' very well. 'Yes, Miss Wuth, I've been wantin' a pair of them dangly jet eawin's for so long!' And what do you suppose?" Agnes exploded in conclusion. "Ruth went and bought them for her! She had them on to-night."

"I don't care," Ruth said, with conviction. "The earrings came nearer to curing Olga than all Dr. Forsyth's medicine. He said so himself."

"What do you think of that?" giggled Agnes.

"I think it was awfully sweet of our Ruth," declared Cecile, hugging the oldest Kenway sister.

Mrs. MacCall, for her part, was not at all sure that the Kenway sisters did not "encourage pauperism" in thus helping their tenants. Mrs. MacCall was conservative in the extreme.

"No," Ruth said earnestly, "the dear little babies, and the little folks with empty 'tummies,' are not paupers, Mrs. MacCall. Nor are their parents such. We haven't a lazy tenant family in the Stower houses."

"That may be as may be," said the housekeeper, shaking her head. "But they are too frequently out o' work to suit me. And guidness knows there's plenty to do in the world."

"They're just unfortunate," reiterated Ruth. "We have been lucky. We never did a thing, we Kenways, to get Uncle Peter's wealth. We've had better luck than the Pedermans and Goronofskys."

"Hush, my lassie! If you undertake to level things in this world for all, you've a big job cut out for you. Nae doot of that."

Although the housekeeper was often opposed both in opinion and practice to Ruth and her sisters, the latter were eager to have Mrs. MacCall go with the vacation party as chaperone and man-

ager. And, indeed, had Mrs. MacCall not agreed, it is doubtful if Ruth would have accepted Mr. Howbridge's invitation to go into the North Woods to Red Deer Lodge.

Mrs. MacCall sacrificed her own desires and some comfort to accompany the young folks; but she did it cheerfully because of her love for the Corner House girls.

Aunt Sarah Maltby would remain at home to oversee things at the Corner House; and of course Linda and Uncle Rufus would be with her.

Trunks had been packed the day before the early celebration of Christmas in the Meadow Street lodge room, and had been sent on by train with the serving people that Hedden, Mr. Howbridge's butler and factotum, had engaged to go ahead of the vacation party and prepare Red Deer Lodge for occupancy over the holidays.

Of course, Neale O'Neil and the older girls had their bags to carry with them, and Sammy Pinkney came over to the old Corner House bright and early on the morning of departure, lugging his bulging suitcase.

"And I hope," Agnes said with severity, "that you haven't worms in that suitcase, with a lot of other worthless truck, as you had when you went on our automobile tour, Sammy."

"Huh! where'd I dig fishworms this time of year?" responded the boy with scorn. "Besides, mom packed this bag, and she's left out a whole lot of things I'll need up there in the woods. She

won't even let me take my bow-arrer and a steel trap I got down at the blacksmith shop by the canal. Of course, the latch of the trap was broke, but we might have fixed it and used it to catch wolves with."

"Oh, my!" squealed Dot. "*Wolves?* Why, they are savage!"

"Course they are savage," said Sammy.

"But—but Mr. Howbridge, our guardian, wouldn't let any wolves stay around that Darling Lodge. They might eat my Alice-doll!"

"Sure," agreed the boy, as Agnes was not within hearing. "Like enough the wolf pack will chase us when we are sleighing, and you'll have to throw that doll over to pacificate 'em so we can escape with our lives. They do that in Russia. Throw the babies away to save folks' lives."

"Well!" exclaimed Tess, half doubting this bold statement. "Babies must be awful cheap in Russia. Cheaper than they are here. You know we can't get a baby in this house, and we all would like to have one."

But Dot had been stricken dumb by Sammy's wild statement. She hugged the Alice-doll to her breast, and her eyes were wide with fear.

"Do you suppose that may happen, Tess?" she whispered.

"What may happen?"

"That we get chased by wolfs and—and have to throw somebody overboard to 'em?"

"I don't believe so," said Tess, after all somewhat impressed by Sammy's assurance.

"Well, anyway," said Dot, "I was only going to take Alice up there to that Lodge; but I'll take the sailor-doll, too. He can stand being thrown to the wolves better than Alice. He's tougher."

If it had not already been decided to take Tom Jonah, the big Newfoundland, along on this winter trip, Dot might really have balked at going.

CHAPTER VI

ON THE WINGS OF THE WIND

However, aside from Dot's disturbance of mind over the trip into the deep woods where, on occasion, babies had to be flung to wolves, there was something that disturbed Ruth on this morning which almost made her doubt the advisability of starting for Red Deer Lodge.

Ruth had been up as early as Linda, the Finnish maid. There was still much to do, and the sleigh would be at the door at eight-thirty. When Linda came down, however, she stopped at Ruth's door and said she had heard Uncle Rufus groaning most of the night. The old colored man was undoubtedly suffering from one of his recurrent rheumatic attacks.

Ruth hurried up to the third story of the house and to Uncle Rufus' room.

"Yes'm, Missie Ruth," groaned the old man. "Ah's jes' knocked right down ag'in. Ah don' believe Ah's goin' to be able to git up a-tall to see yo' off dis mawnin'."

"Poor Uncle Rufus!" said the oldest Corner House girl, commiseratingly. "I believe I'd better telephone to Dr. Forsyth and let him come—"

"No'm. Ah don' want dat Dr. Forsyth to come

a-near me, Missie Ruth," interrupted Uncle Rufus.

"Why, of course you do," said the girl. "He gave you something before that helped you. Don't you remember?"

"Ah don' say he don' know he's business, Missie Ruth," said the old man, shaking his head. "Mebbe his med'cine's jest as good as de nex' doctor's med'cine. But Ah don' want Dr. Forsyth no mo'."

"Why not?"

"Dr. Forsyth done insulted me," said the old man, with rising indignation. "He done talk about me."

"Why, Uncle Rufus!"

"Sho' has!" repeated the black man. "An' Ah nebber did him a mite o' harm. He done say things about me dat I can't nebber overlook—no, ma'am!"

"Why, Uncle Rufus!" murmured the worried Ruth, "I think you must be mistaken. I can't imagine Dr. Forsyth being unkind, or saying unkind things about one."

"He sho' did," declared the obstinate old man. "And he done put it in writin'. You jes' reach me ma best coat, Missie Ruth. It's all set down dar on ma burial papers."

Of course, Uncle Rufus, like most frugal colored people, belonged to a "burial association"—an insurance scheme by which one must die to win.

"What could Dr. Forsyth have said about you

that you think is unkind, Uncle Rufus?" repeated Ruth, as she came into the room to get the coat.

"Ah tell yo' what he done said!" exclaimed the old man, indignantly. "Dr. Forsyth say Ah was a drunkard an' a joy-rider! Dat's what he say! An' de goodness know, Missie Ruth, I ain't tetch a drap of gin fo' many a long year, and I ain't nebber step foot in even your automobile. No'm! He done insulted me befo' de members of ma burial lodge, an' I don' want nothin' mo' to do wid dat white man—no'm!"

He spread out the insurance policy with a flourish and pointed to the examining doctor's notation regarding Uncle Rufus' former illness: "Autotoxication."

"Ah's a respectable man," urged Uncle Rufus, evidently hurt to the quick by what he thought was Dr. Forsyth's uncalled-for criticism. "Ah don't get drunk in no auto—no'm! An' I don't go scootin' roun' de country in one o' dem 'bominations. Dere is niggers w'at owns one o' dem flivvers an' drinks gin wid it. But not Unc' Rufus—no'm!"

"I never would accuse you of such reprehensible habits," Ruth assured him, having considerable difficulty in suppressing after all a desire to laugh. "Nor does Dr. Forsyth mean anything like that."

She explained carefully to the old negro that "autotoxication" meant "self-poisoning"—the poisoning of the body by unexpelled organic mat-

ter. This poison, in the form of an acid in the blood, was the cause of Uncle Rufus' pains and aches.

"Fo' de lan's sake!" murmured Uncle Rufus. "Is dat sho' 'nough so, Missie Ruth?"

"You know I would not mislead you, Uncle Rufus."

"Dat's right. You would not," agreed the old man. "An' is dat what dat fool white doctor mean? Ah jes' got rheumatics, like Ah always has?"

"Yes, Uncle Rufus."

"Tell me, Missie Ruth," he asked, "what do dem doctors want to use sech wo'ds fo', when dere is common wo'ds to use dat a pusson kin understan'?"

"Just for that reason, I fancy," laughed Ruth. "So the patient cannot understand. The doctors think it isn't well for the patient to know too much about what ails him, so they call ordinary illnesses by hard names."

"Ain't it a fac'? Ain't it a fac'?" repeated Uncle Rufus, shaking his head. "Ah reckon if we knowed too much, we wouldn't want doctors a-tall, eh? Well, now, Missie Ruth, you let dat Lindy gal git ma' medicine bottle filled down to de drug store, and Ah'll dose up like Ah done befo'. If dat white doctor's medicine was good fo' one time, it ought to be good fo' another time."

Uncle Rufus remained in bed, however, and the little girls and Sammy, as well as Neale and Agnes,

trooped up to say good-bye to him before they started for the railway station.

The north-bound express train halted at Milton at three minutes past nine, and the Corner House party were in good season for it. Mr. Howbridge joined them on the station platform. Hedden, the lawyer's man, having gone ahead to make the path smooth for his employer and his friends, Mr. Howbridge and Neale attended to getting the tickets and to the light baggage; and they made the three older girls, Mrs. MacCall, and the children comfortable in the chair car. Tom Jonah, of course, rode in the baggage car.

It was two hundred miles and more to Culberton, at the foot of Long Lake. The train made very good time, but it was past one o'clock when they alighted at the lake city. There was a narrow gauge road here that followed the line of the lake in a northerly direction; but it was little more than a logging road and the trains were so slow, and the schedule so poor, that Mr. Howbridge had planned for other and more novel means of transportation up the lake to the small town from which they would have to strike back into the wilderness by "tote-road" to Red Deer Lodge. But this new means of transportation, he told the young people, depended entirely upon the wind.

"Goodness!" gasped Agnes, "are we going up the lake by kite?"

"In a balloon, maybe?" Cecile laughed.

"Oh!" murmured Tess, who was much inter-

ested in air traffic, "I hope it's a big aeroplane."

"Nothing like that," Neale assured her. "But if we have a good wind you'll think we're flying, Tess."

Mr. Howbridge had taken the ex-circus boy into his confidence; but the rest of the party were so busy greeting Luke Shepard, who was waiting for them at this point, that they did not consider much how they were to get up the lake. There was no train leaving Culberton over the Lake Branch until evening. Neale disappeared immediately after greeting Luke, and took Tom Jonah with him.

In a few minutes Neale returned to the waiting room of the Culberton railroad station, and said to Mr. Howbridge:

"They are about ready. Man says the wind is good, and likely to be fresher, if anything. Favorable time. He's making 'em ready."

"What's going on?" asked Luke, who was a handsome young collegian particularly interested in Ruth Kenway, and not too serious to be enthusiastic over the secret the lawyer and Neale had between them.

"Come on and we'll show you," Neale said, grinning.

"No, no!" exclaimed Mr. Howbridge. "Let us have lunch first. We have a long, cold ride before us."

"In what?" Agnes asked. "We don't take to the sleigh yet, do we?"

"Aren't the cars on the branch line heated?" Ruth asked. "You know, we must not let the children get cold—and Mrs. MacCall."

"Don't mind about me, lassie," returned the Scotchwoman. "I'll trust myself to Mr. Howbridge."

"We'll go to the hotel first of all," said the lawyer. "Hedden will have arranged for our comfort there—and other things, as well. Do not be afraid for the children, Martha."

But "Martha" could not help being a bit worried, even if Mrs. MacCall was along. And Neale's grin was too impish to be comforting.

"I know you men folks are cooking up something," she sighed. "And I am not at all sure, Mr. Howbridge, that you consider the needs of small children like Tess and Dot and Sammy."

"Huh!" grunted Sammy, who overheard this.

"I suppose if I had taken my twins home three months ago when Frank Birdsall died, you think I would have learned something about the needs and care of young persons by this time?" suggested the lawyer.

"Oh, I am sure you would have learned a great deal," agreed Ruth, unable to suppress a smile.

"I wish I had!" groaned Mr. Howbridge.

The mystery of the disappearance of Ralph and Rowena Birdsall weighed on Mr. Howbridge's mind continually. He did not often let the trouble come to the surface, however, being desirous of giving the young people with him a good time.

The surprise in store for them added zest to the enjoyment of the nice luncheon at the Culberton hotel. At half past two they all trooped out of the hotel, bags in hand, and instead of returning to the railway station, set off down the hill toward the docks.

"Are we going by steamer?" Agnes wanted to know. "Is there a channel open through the ice? I never *did!*"

"If there were two feet of ice on the Arlington Pond so that they could not drag it for the poor Birdsall twins," Ruth said, "surely this lake must be frozen quite as thick."

"But there's a sailboat! I see one!" cried Tess, pointing between the buildings as they approached the waterfront.

"And there's another," said Sammy. "Oh, Je-ru-sa-*lem!* Looky, Aggie! That boat's sailing on the ice!"

"Oh-ee!" squealed Agnes, clasping her hands and letting her bag fall to the ground. "Ice-boats! Neale! Are they really ice-boats?"

"And are we going to sail on them?" murmured Ruth.

"For mercy's sake!" gasped the housekeeper. "Here's a fine thing! Have you gone daft, Mr. Howbridge?"

"It will be a new experience for you and me, Mrs. MacCall," said the lawyer calmly. "But they tell me it is very invigorating."

"It's the nearest thing to flying, as far as the

sensation goes, that there is, I guess," Luke Shepard put in.

"I used to have a scooter when we were in winter quarters," said Neale O'Neil to Agnes. "Don't be afraid, Aggie."

"Oh, I won't be afraid if you are along, Neale," promptly declared the little beauty. "I know you will take care of me."

"You bet!" responded Neale, his eyes shining.

As they came down to the big wharf the party got a better view of the lake front. There were at least a dozen ice-boats, large and small, in motion. Those farthest out from the shore had caught the full sweep of the wind and were darting about, as Mrs. MacCall said, like water-bugs on the surface of a pond.

Ruth looked around keenly as they came out on the wharf.

"Why!" she said to Mr. Howbridge, "this is the lumber company's wharf. The company you said had bought the timber on the Birdsall Estate."

"It is the Neven Lumber Company, as you can see by the sign over the offices yonder," agreed their guardian. "And here comes Neven himself."

A red-faced man with a red vest on which were small yellow dots and some grease spots, and who chewed a big and black cigar and wore his hard hat on one side of his head, approached the group as Mr. Howbridge spoke. He hailed the latter jovially.

"Hey, Howbridge! Glad to see you. So these are your folks, are they? Hope you'll have a merry Christmas up there in the woods. Nice place, Birdsall's Lodge."

"Thank you," said the lawyer quietly.

"Which of 'em's Birdsall's young ones?" continued the lumber dealer, staring about with very bold eyes, and especially at Ruth Kenway and Cecile Shepard.

"I am sorry to say, Mr. Neven," said the lawyer, "that the Birdsall twins are not with us. The children have run away from their home—a home with people who have known them since they were born. It is a very strange affair, and is causing me much worry."

"You don't say!" exclaimed Neven. "Too bad! Too bad! But they'll turn up. Young 'uns always do. I ran away myself when I was a kid; and look at me now," and the lumberman puffed out his chest proudly, as though satisfied that Lem Neven was a good deal of a man.

"I reckon," pursued the lumberman, "that you think it's your duty to go up to the Birdsall place and look over the piece I've got stumpage on. But you don't re'lly need to. My men are scientific, I tell you. I don't hire no old has-beens like Ike M'Graw. Those old timber cruisers are a hundred years behind the times."

"They have one very good attribute. At least, Ike has," Mr. Howbridge said quietly.

"What's that?" asked Neven.

"He is perfectly honest," was the dry response. "I shall base my demands for the Birdsall estate on Ike's report. I assure you of that now, Mr. Neven, so that you need build no false hopes upon the reports of your own cruisers. As the contract stands we can close it out and deal with another company if it seems best to do so. And some company—either yours or another——will go in there right after New Year's and begin to cut."

He turned promptly away from the red-faced man and followed his party along the wharf to its end. Here lay two large ice-boats. There was a boxlike cockpit on each that would hold four passengers comfortably, besides the tiller men and the boy who "trimmed ship." A crew of two went with each boat.

"How will the other two of our party travel?" asked Ruth, when these arrangements were explained.

Already Neale O'Neil had beckoned Agnes to one side. There lay behind the two big boats a skeleton-like arrangement, with a seat at the stern no wider than a bobsled, and another on the "outrigger," or crossbeam. This scooter carried a huge boom for a leg-o'-mutton sail, and it was a type of the very fastest ice-boats on the lake.

Neale helped the eager Agnes down a rude ladder to the ice. She was just reckless enough to desire to try the new means of locomotion. Her exclamations of delight drew Ruth to the edge of the wharf over their heads.

"What are you two doing down there?" asked the older girl.

"Oh, now, Ruthie!" murmured Agnes, "do let me go with Neale in this pretty boat. There isn't room for us in the bigger boats. Do!"

Ruth knew very little about racing ice-boats. The scooter looked no more dangerous to her than did the lumbering craft that Hedden had engaged for the rest of the party.

These bigger boats, furnished with square sails rather than the leg-o'-muttons they now flaunted, were commonly used to transfer merchandise, or even logs up and down the lake. They were lumbering and slow.

"Well, if Mr. Howbridge says you can," the oldest Corner House girl agreed, still somewhat doubtful.

Neale had already begged permission of Mr. Howbridge. The lawyer was quite as ignorant regarding ice-boating as Ruth herself. Neither of them considered that any real harm could come to Neale and Agnes in the smaller craft.

The crews of the larger ice-boats were experienced boatmen. They got their lumbering craft under way just as soon as the passengers were settled with their light baggage in the cockpits. There were bear robes and blankets in profusion. Although the wind was keen, the party did not expect that Jack Frost would trouble them.

"Isn't this great?" cried Cecile, who was in one of the boats with Ruth, her brother, and Sammy

Pinkney. "My! we always manage to have such very nice times when we are with you Corner House girls, Ruthie."

"This is all new to me," admitted her friend. "I hope nothing will happen to wreck us."

"Wreck us! Fancy!" laughed Cecile.

"This wind is very strong, just the same," said Ruth.

"Hold hard!" cried Luke, laughing. "Low bridge!"

The boom swung over, and they all stooped quickly to avoid it. The next moment the big sail filled, bulging with the force of the wind. The heavy runners began to whine over the powdered ice, and they went swiftly onward toward the middle of the lake.

"On the wings of the wind! How delightful!" cried Cecile. Then she said again: "Isn't this great?"

CHAPTER VII

THE SCOOTER

Sammy Pinkney had desired greatly to go with Neale and Agnes on the smaller ice-boat; but they would not hear to the proposal. He struck up an acquaintance with the "crew" of the big boat to which he was assigned, and gave Ruth and Luke Shepard no trouble.

In the other large boat Mr. Howbridge, Mrs. MacCall and the two smallest Corner House girls, as well as Tom Jonah, were very cozily ensconced. Dot clutched the Alice-doll very tightly and Tom Jonah barked loudly when the barge slithered out upon the lake and began to gather speed as the fresh wind filled the big sail.

Mrs. MacCall continued to have her doubts regarding the safety of this strange means of locomotion.

"There's one good thing about it," she chattered, as the sledge jarred over a few hummocks. "There's nae so far to fall if we do fall out."

"It's perfectly safe, they tell me," Mr. Howbridge assured her.

"Aye. It may look so," the good woman admitted. "But 'tis like Tam Taggart goin' to London."

"How was that?" the lawyer asked, smiling.

"Tam was one o' these canny Highlanders, and he made up his mind after muckle thought to spend a week in London. He went to 'broaden his mind,' as they call it. Truly, to prove to himself that London and the English were quite as bad as he'd believed all his life.

"So he goes to London, and he comes home again—very solemn like. Nobody could get a word out of him at first," pursued Mrs. MacCall. "Finally the folks, they gathered around him at the post-office and one says:

" 'What ails ye, Tam? Ye've no told us anything aboot Lunnon. Is it nae the fine place they'd have us believe?'

" 'Oo, aye, 'tis nae so bad,' says Tam. 'But they are nae honest up there.'

" 'Whit way air they no honest, Tam?' asks his friends.

" 'Weel,' says Tam, 'I aye had my doots all the time; but I made sure the day I bought me a penny-packet of needles. On the outside o' it, it said there was one thousand needles inside.'

" 'Oh, aye?'

" 'I coonted 'em,' says Tam, 'an'—wad ye believe it?—there was only nine hundred and ninety-three!' And this boat-sliding may look all right," concluded the Corner House housekeeper, "but, like Tam, 'I have me doots!' "

As the boat gathered speed, following the one on which Ruth and her companions sailed out into

the open lake, the little girls squealed their delight. Even Dot forgot her fears. And Tom Jonah "smiled" just as broadly as he could.

"Oh, Tessie!" Dot gasped. "It *is* like flying! My breath's too big for my mouth—just like I was in a swing."

"I guess you must feel like poor Sandyface did when Sammy sent her with her kittens from our house to his in the fly-a-majig. You remember?" said Tess.

"I should say I did!" agreed Dot in her old-fashioned way. "What an awful time that was, wasn't it? And Sammy got spanked."

"Sammy's always getting spanked," Tess said coolly.

"Ye-as. He is. But I guess he's never got used to it yet," responded the smallest Corner House girl thoughtfully.

The wind, when they faced forward, almost took their breath. The little girls cowered down under the warm robes, looking astern. So their bright eyes were the first to catch sight of the scooter shooting out into the lake behind them.

The wharves and dun-colored houses of Culberton were already far astern. And how fast the town was receding!

The smaller ice-boat, however, overtook the big boats almost as though the latter were standing still! The others caught sight of the careening ice-racer soon after Dot and Tess first shouted. But neither of the little girls nor the other mem-

bers of the party realized that Neale and Agnes were aboard the craft that came, meteor-like, up the lake.

They had started sedately enough, Neale O'Neil at the stern with the tiller ropes in his mittened hands and Agnes strapped into the seat on the outrigger, with the bight of the running sheet in her charge.

Neale had told her plainly what to do ordinarily, and had instructed her to look to him for orders in any emergency. It looked to be very simple, this working out an ice-scooter that had in it the possibility of sailing at any speed up to a hundred miles an hour!

Somebody had started the creaking boat with the purchase of a pike pole at the rear. The peavy bit into the ice, and the scooter rocked out from the wharf. The big sail was already spread. They had wabbled out of the confinement of the dock slowly and sedately enough.

Suddenly the wind puffed into the sail and bellied it. The stick bent and groaned. It seemed as though the runners stuck to the surface of the ice and the mast would be torn from the framework of the craft.

Then she really started!

The powerful on-thrust of the wind in the sail shot the scooter away from the shore. She swooped like a gull across the ice. The whining of steel on ice rose to a painful shriek in Agnes' ears.

She was scared. Oh, yes, she was scared! But she would not admit it—not for worlds! Faster and faster the scooter moved. The girl looked back once at Neale and caught a glimpse of his confident smile. It heartened her wonderfully.

"Hold hard, Aggie!" his strong voice shouted, and she nodded, blinking the water out of her eyes.

They had headed up Long Lake as they left the shore, and they could travel on the wind, and without tacking, for a long way. They overhauled the two big barges in which the rest of the party sailed, in a way that fairly made Agnes gasp. She had never traveled so fast before in all her life.

The scooter struck a hummock in the ice. It was not six inches above the general level of the crystal surface of the lake. But the impetus it gave the ice-boat sent that seemingly fragile craft up into the air! She left the ice for a long, breath-taking, humming jump. It seemed to Agnes as though they were going right up into the air, very much as an aeroplane soars from the earth.

Indeed, had the ice-boat a movable tail like an aeroplane, surely it would completely take to the air. Next to piloting an aeroplane, ice-boat racing is the greatest sport in the world.

Spang! The scooter took to the ice again and ran like a scared rabbit. The stays sang a new tune. Had the sheet not had a simple cast about a peg beside her, Agnes would surely have lost the bight of it.

But Neale had told her certain things to do, and she would not fail him. Through half-blinded eyes she cast another glance at him over her shoulder. The boy showed no evidence of panic, and Agnes was ashamed to display her own inner feelings.

When Neale said, "You're a regular little sport, Aggie!" it was the finest tribute to character that Agnes Kenway knew anything about. She was determined to win his approval now, if never before.

Ruth saw them coming, but had no idea at first that the careening ice-racer was the small boat that Neale and her sister had engaged for the run up the lake. The schooner came on like, and with, the wind!

"See that boat, Cecile!" cried the oldest Corner House girl. "How reckless it is to ride so fast. Suppose the mast should snap or a skate should break? My!"

"But look how they fly!" agreed her friend.

"Hey!" exclaimed Luke. "That's Neale O'Neil steering that thing."

"Oh! Mercy! *Agnes!*" shrieked Ruth, her eyes suddenly opened to the identity of the two on the scooter.

"Hoorah!" yelled Luke. "What speed!"

The party on the other big boat had recognized the two on the scooter. The fur-trimmed coat and brilliant-hued hood Agnes wore could not be mistaken.

"Stop them! Stop them!" moaned Ruth, really alarmed.

It seemed to her that the boat she was riding in was going much too fast for safety; but the scooter flew up the lake at a pace that made the big boats seem to stand still.

Neale plainly knew how to handle the racer. He passed the two barges and then tacked, aiming to cross the bows of the bigger craft.

Instantly, as the boom swung around, Agnes' end of the crossbeam went into the air! They saw her sail upward, the flashing steel runners at least four feet above the ice!

The girl's wind-whipped face was still smiling. Indeed, that smile seemed frozen on. As the racer rushed by Agnes looked down upon her sisters and other friends and waved one hand to them.

Then, like a huge kite, the big-bellied sail raced off across the lake, taking the reckless pair almost instantly out of earshot.

CHAPTER VIII

THE VILLAGE ON THE ICE

The wild plunge of the scooter across the lake carried it, before a wind-squall, far out of hearing of Ruth Kenway's voice. Yet she shouted long and loud after her sister. Luke pulled her back into her seat when she would have stood up to watch the careening scooter.

"They are in no danger," he urged. "Take it easy, Ruth."

"Why, they must be in peril! Did you see her —Agnes—up in the air?"

"Well, she's down again all right now, Ruthie," said Cecile Shepard soothingly.

"Oh, if I had only known!"

"Known what?" asked Luke, inclined to grin if the truth was told.

"That the small boat would sail like that. Why, it is worse than a racing automobile!"

"Faster, I guess. Almost as fast as a motorcycle," Luke agreed. "But Neale's managed one of those things before. He told me all about it."

"But why didn't somebody tell me about it?" demanded Ruth rather stormily.

"Tell you about what?" asked Cecile.

"About how fast that reckless thing would sail?

Why! I'd never have allowed Aggie to ride on it in this world."

In the other big ice-boat there was much anxiety as well. Mr. Howbridge and Mrs. MacCall would have stopped the reckless ones could they have done so, and Tom Jonah was barking his head off. He, too, had recognized Agnes and Neale and believed that all was not right with them.

The scooter, however, was clear across the lake again; they saw it tack once more, and this time, because of the favoring breeze, Neale headed her directly up the lake. Every minute he and Agnes on their racer were leaving the rest of the party behind.

These scooters cannot be sailed at a slow pace. The skeleton craft is so light, and the sail so big, that the least puff of breeze drives it ahead at railroad speed.

Now with a pretty steady breeze behind them, the scooter was bound to "show off." Nor did the young people realize just how fast they sailed, or how perilous their course looked to their friends.

"We're running away from them!" Agnes managed to throw back over her shoulder at Neale.

"Can't help it!" he cried in return. "This old scooter has taken the bit in its teeth."

Agnes had begun to enjoy the speed to the full now. Why! this was better than motoring over the finest kind of oiled road. And the young girl did like to travel fast.

She began to see that the farther they went up

Long Lake the wilder the shores appeared to be and the fewer houses there were visible. Here and there was a little village, with a white-steepled church pointing heavenward among the almost black spruce and pine. Again, a cleared farm showed forth, its fields sheeted with snow.

The lake was quite ten miles broad in most places, and occasionally it spread to a width of more than twice that number of miles. Then they could barely see the hazy shoreline at all.

"We could not be lonesomer," thought Agnes, "if we were sailing on the ocean!"

The sails behind them had all disappeared. Once a squad of timber barges with square sails was passed. The barges were going up empty to the head of the lake there to be loaded and await a favoring breeze to bring them back to Culberton again. It was much cheaper for the lumber concerns to sail the logs down the lake if they could, than to load them on the narrow-gauge railroad and pay freight to Culberton. The sticks had to be handled at the foot of the lake, anyway.

The scooter went past these slowly sailing barges almost as rapidly as they had passed the two boats in which sailed the remainder of the Corner House party. The stays creaked and the steel whined on the ice, while the wind boomed in the big sail like a muffled drum.

The sun, hazy and red like the face of a haymaker in harvest time, was going westward and would soon disappear behind the mountain ridge

which followed the shoreline of the lake, but at a distance. It was up in the foothills of those mountains that Red Deer Lodge was located.

After passing the empty barges the boy and girl on the scooter saw no other sail nor anything which excited their attention until Agnes suddenly beheld a group of objects on the ice near the western shore of the lake, not many miles ahead.

She began almost immediately to wonder what these things could be, but she could not make Neale O'Neil understand the question she shouted to him. By and by, however, she saw for herself that the objects were a number of little huts, and that they really were built upon the frozen surface of the lake.

Agnes was naturally very much interested in this strange sight. A village on the ice was something quite novel to her mind. She desired very much to ask questions of Neale, but the wind was too great and they were sailing too fast for her to make her desire known to her boy friend.

So she just used her eyes (when they did not water too much) and stared at the strange collection of huts and its vicinity with all her might. Why! from lengths of stove pipe through some of the slanting roofs, smoke was climbing into the hazy atmosphere.

Back of the ice-village, on the steep western shore of the lake, was built a regular town of slab shanties, with a slab church, stores, and the like. Quite a village, this, and when Agnes looked back

at Neale questioningly and pointed to them, he shouted: "Coxford." So she knew it was their destination.

Mr. Howbridge had said they would disembark from the ice-boats at Coxford, and there would take sledges into the woods. It was fast growing toward evening, however, and Agnes knew it would be too late when they landed to continue the journey to Red Deer Lodge before the next morning.

The ice-village was about two miles out from the shore. There were half a hundred huts, some a dozen feet square. But for the most part they were much smaller. They had doors, but no windows, and, as the scooter drew swiftly nearer, Agnes could see that the structures were little more than wind-breaks.

There were a number of people moving about the settlement of huts, however, and not a few children among them, as well as dogs. As the scooter drew near she saw, too, a team of horses drawing a sledge. This sledge was being loaded with boxes, or crates; and what those boxes could contain began to puzzle Agnes as much as anything else she saw about the queer village.

Neale steered outside the line of the ice settlement; but once beyond it he brought the scooter up into the wind and yelled at Agnes to let go the sheet and falls. She loosened the lines from the pegs and allowed them to slip. Down came the shaking canvas, the wooden hoops clattering together as they slid down the greased mast. In a

moment the speed of the scooter was lost and they were all but smothered in the fallen canvas.

"Get out from under!" Neale's voice shouted.

He dropped off at the stern and ran to the girl's aid. He unbuckled the belt that had secured Agnes to her seat on the outrigger all this while, and fairly dragged her from under the flapping sail.

"Fine work!" Neale shouted, his voice full of laughter. "We made record time. But I'll let somebody else furl that sail."

"Oh, Neale!" gasped the girl, hobbling like a cripple. "I ca—can't walk. I'm frozen stiff!"

"Come on to the shanties. We'll get warm. Take hold here, Aggie. You'll be all right in a few minutes."

"Oh, dear!" she said. "I did not know I was so cold. But what a race it was, Neale! Ruth will give us fits."

"Won't she?" chuckled Neale.

"But what is this place, Neale?" Agnes went on. "What are these people doing here?"

"Fishing. Those are frozen fish they are loading on that sledge. Oh! There it goes! We can't get ashore on that, after all."

" 'Fishing'?" repeated the amazed girl. "How do they fish through the ice? I don't see any holes."

"No. The holes wouldn't stay open long, as cold as it is out here. It's about twenty below

"He fairly dragged her from under the flapping sail."

zero right now, my lady, and I'm keeping a sharp eye on your nose."

"Oh! Oh!" gasped Agnes, putting her mittened hand tentatively to her nose. "Is that why you told me to keep my collar up over my mouth and nose?"

"It is!" declared the boy, rubbing his own face vigorously. "If you see any white spot on anybody's face up here in this weather, grab a handful of snow and begin rubbing the spot."

"Mercy!" Agnes murmured, with a gay little laugh. "Lucky Trix Severn doesn't come up here. She uses rice powder dreadfully, and folks would think she was being frost-bitten."

"Uh-huh!" agreed Neale.

"But you haven't told me how they fish," said the girl, as they approached nearer to the huts and she was able to walk better.

"Through the ice of course," he laughed. "Only you don't see the holes. They are inside the huts."

"You don't mean it, Neale?"

"To be sure I mean it! Some of those big shanties house whole families. You see there are children and dogs. They have pot stoves which warm the huts to a certain degree, and on which they cook. And they have bunks built against the walls, with plenty of bedding."

"Why, I should think they would get their death of cold!" gasped the girl.

"That's just what they don't get," Neale rejoined. "You can bet there are no 'white plague' patients here. This atmosphere will kill tubercular germs like a hammer kills a flea."

"Goodness, Neale!" giggled Agnes. "Did you ever kill a flea with a hammer?"

"Yep. Sand-flea," he assured her, grinning. "Oh! I'm one quick lad, Aggie."

She really thought he was joking, however, until she had looked into two or three of the huts. People really did live in them, as she saw. In the middle of the plank floors was a well, with open water kept clear of frost. The set-lines were fastened to pegs in the planks and the "flags" announced when a fish was on the hook.

A smiling woman, done up like an Eskimo, invited them into one shack. She had evidently not seen the scooter arrive from down the lake and thought the boy and girl had walked out from Coxford.

"Hello!" she said. "Goin' to try your hands at fishin'? You're town folks, ain't you?"

"Yes," said Agnes, politely. "We come from Milton."

"Lawsy! That's a fur ways," said the woman. She was peeling potatoes, and a kettle was boiling on the stove at one side. The visitors knew by the odor that there was corned beef in the pot. "You goin' to try your hands?" the woman repeated.

"No," said Neale. "We are with a party that is going up to Red Deer Lodge."

"Oh! That's the Birdsall place. You can't git up there to-night. It's too fur."

"I guess we shall stay in Coxford," admitted Neale.

"Didn't know but you an' your sister wanted to fish. Old Manny Cox got ketched with rheumatics so that he had to give up fishin' this season. I can hire you his shanty."

"No, thank you!" murmured Agnes, her eyes round with interest.

"I let it for a week or more to two gals," said the woman complacently. "Got five dollars out of 'em for Manny. He'll be needin' the money. Better stay awhile and try the fishin'."

"Goodness! Two girls alone?" asked Agnes.

"Yes. Younger'n you are, too. But they knowed their way around, I guess," said the woman. "Good lookin' gals. Nice clo'es. Town folks, I guess. Mebbe they wasn't older'n my Bob, and he's just turned twelve."

"Twelve years old! And two girls alone?" murmured Agnes.

"Oh, there ain't nobody to hurt you here. We don't never need no constable out here on the ice. There's plenty of women folks—Miz' Ashtable, and Hank Crummet's wife, and Mary Boley and her boys. Oh, lots o' women here. We can help make money in the winter.

"There! See that set-line bob?"

She dropped the potato she was paring and crossed to the well. One of the flags had dipped. With a strong hand she reeled in the wet line. At its end was a big pickerel—the biggest pickerel the visitors had ever seen.

"There!" exclaimed the woman. "Sorry I didn't git that before Joe Jagson went with his load of fish. That's four pound if it weighs an ounce."

She shook the flopping fish off the hook into a basket and then hung the basket outside the door. In the frosty air the fish did not need to be packed in ice. It would literally be ice within a very few minutes.

"Got to hang 'em up to keep the dogs from gettin' them," said the woman, rebaiting the hook and then returning to her potato paring. "Can't leave 'em in a creel in the water, neither; pike would come along an' eat 'em clean to the bone."

"Oh!" gasped Agnes.

"Yes. Regular cannibals, them pike," said the woman. "But all big fish will eat little ones."

"What kind of fish do you catch?" Neale asked.

"Pickerel and pike, whitebait (we calls 'em that), perch, some lake bass and once in a while a lake trout. Trout's out o' season. We don't durst sell 'em. But we eat 'em. They ain't no 'season,' I tell 'em, for a boy's appetite; and I got three boys and my man to feed."

At that moment there was a great shouting and

barking of dogs outside, and Neale and Agnes went out of the hut to learn what it meant. The Corner House girl whispered to the boy:

"What do you think about those two twelve year old girls coming here to stay and fish through the ice?"

"Great little sports," commented Neale.

"Well," exclaimed Agnes, "that's being too much of a sport, if you ask me!"

CHAPTER IX

A COLD SCENT

The barking of the dogs was in answer to the booming note that Tom Jonah sent echoing across the ice. Agnes and Neale found that the two big ice-boats were near at hand.

As one of the crew of Mr. Howbridge's boat owned the scooter that Neale and Agnes had come up the lake on, that owner wished to recover his abandoned ice-boat. Besides, it was not more than two miles over the ice to Coxford, and the wind was going down with the sun. The big boats would have made slow work of it beating in to the slab-town on the western shore of the lake.

Neale and Agnes ran out across the ice to meet their friends. Most of the party were glad indeed to get on their feet, for the ride up the lake had been a cold one.

In fact, Tess could scarcely walk when she got out of her seat, and Dot tumbled right down on the ice, almost weeping.

"I—I guess I haven't got any feet," the smallest Corner House girl half sobbed. "I can't feel 'em."

"Course you've got feet, Dot," said Sammy, staggering a good deal himself when he walked

toward her. "Just you jump up and down like this," and he proceeded to follow his own advice.

"But won't we break through the ice?" murmured the smallest Corner House girl.

"Why, Dot! do you s'pose," demanded Tess, "that you can jump hard enough to break through two feet of ice?"

"Well, I never tried it before, did I?" demanded Dot. "How should *I* know what might happen to the old ice?"

Agnes hurried the little ones over to the shanty of the friendly fisher-woman, where they could get warm and be sheltered from the raw wind that still puffed down in gusts from the hills.

Tom Jonah had jumped out of the cockpit of the ice-boat and found himself immediately in the middle of what Luke Shepard called "a fine ruction."

"Canines to right of him, canines to left of him, volleyed and thundered!" laughed the college youth. "Hey! call off your fish-hounds, or Tom Jonah will eat them up."

One cur was already running away yelping and limping; the others took notice that the old dog had powerful jaws. But Ruth insisted that Tom Jonah be put on a leash, and Luke meekly obeyed. Indeed, he was likely to do almost anything that the oldest Corner House girl told him to do, "right up to jumping through the ring of a doughnut!" his sister whispered to Mrs. MacCall in great glee.

"Well, my lassie," was the housekeeper's comment, "he might be mindin' a much worse mistress than our Ruthie."

Nothing that Ruth could or did do in most matters was wrong in Mrs. MacCall's opinion, even if she did criticize the Kenways' charity. If Luke Shepard some day expected to get Ruth for his wife, the housekeeper considered that it was only right he should first learn to obey Ruth's behests in all things.

Ruth had a word to say to Neale and Agnes at this time. She pointed out to those two restless and reckless younger ones that there must be no such venturesome escapades during the remainder of this winter vacation as that connected with the ice-scooter.

"If you have no respect for your own bones, think of our feelings," she concluded. "Why! I almost had heart disease when I saw that horrid scooter fly past with Agnes up in the air as though she were on a flying trapeze."

"Shucks, Ruth!" said Neale, "you know I wouldn't let any harm come to Aggie."

"Now, Neale," returned the older girl, "how would you keep her from getting hurt if that ice-boat broke in two, for instance?"

"Oh, well—"

"That's what I thought!" snapped Ruth. "You had not thought of that."

"Don't scold him! Don't scold Neale!" begged Agnes. "He's all right."

"Oh, no, he isn't," said Ruth grimly. "One side of him is left! And you will promise to be good or I'll make Mr. Howbridge send Neale home, right from here."

"Oh!" cried her sister. "You would not be so mean, Ruthie Kenway."

"I don't know but I would," Ruth rejoined. "I don't think so much of boys, anyway—"

"Not until they get to be collegians," whispered Neale shrilly from behind his hand.

Ruth's eyes snapped at that, and she marched away without another word. Mr. Howbridge refrained from commenting upon the incident, for he saw that Ruth had said quite all that was necessary.

Neale and Agnes were much abashed. They followed the others slowly toward the village on the ice. Neale said:

"Well, if she says I can't go any farther I'll stay right here and fish until you come back, Aggie."

"Oh, Neale! You wouldn't!"

"Why not? Maybe I'd make a little money. If two twelve year old girls could stand it for a week here, I don't see why I couldn't stand it for three weeks."

"I've been thinking about those two girls that woman told us about," said Agnes with sudden eagerness.

"What about 'em?"

"Do you s'pose they were girls, Neale O'Neil?"

"Why! what do you mean? How do I know? The woman said they were."

"But two *girls*—and only twelve! It doesn't seem probable. I should think the police—"

"Didn't you hear that woman say there were no constables out here on the ice?" said Neale.

"I don't care! I'm suspicious," declared Agnes.

"Not of that fisher-woman?" asked the boy, puzzled indeed.

"No, no! But no two girls in this world would ever have considered coming out here on the ice to fish. How ridiculous!"

"Say! what are you trying to get at, Agnes Kenway?" demanded her friend. "You do have the craziest ideas!"

"Do I, Mr. Smartie?" she returned. "At least they are ideas. You never seem to suspect a living thing, Neale O'Neil."

"Oh! I give it up," he groaned. "You are too much for me. I'm lashed to the post and you have left me behind."

"Oh, do come on!" exclaimed Agnes, hastily dragging at his jacket sleeve. "If you don't know what I'm about, just keep still and listen."

"Oh, I'll do that little thing for you," returned Neale. "I can be as dumb as a mute quahog with the lockjaw—just watch me!"

He tagged on behind Agnes with much interest. The girl hurried to the shack into which the little folks had been taken for warmth. Mrs. MacCall

was there with them, talking with the genial fisherwoman.

"Hech!" exclaimed the housekeeper, warming her blue hands, "but this is a strange way to live. 'Tis worse than sheep herding in the Highlands. 'Tis so!"

" 'Tain't so bad," said the woman. "And there's good money in the fish. We are mostly all Coxford people here—or folks from back in the hills. Few stragglers come here to bother us."

"But you said two strangers had been here this winter," Agnes interposed, eagerly.

"I said so," the woman agreed. "Two stragglers. Two girls," and she laughed. "But they didn't stay long. They kept to themselves like, and never did us any harm."

"Say, Maw!" The voice came out of a shadowy corner. It was gloomy in the shack, for the sun had now dipped below the hills and twilight had come.

"That's my Bob," said the woman. "He's about the age of them two gals."

"They wasn't two gals, Maw," said Bob from the darkness.

"What d'you mean?"

"One was a boy. Yes, she was—a boy! We kids found it out, and that's why them two lit out over night."

"Good gracious, Bob! What are you sayin'?"

"That's right," said the voice from the dark corner, stubbornly. "They was brother and sis-

ter. They owned up. Run away from somewhere, I guess. And then they run away from here."

Agnes pinched Neale's arm. "What did I tell you?" she whispered.

"Ouch! I don't know. You've told me so many things, Aggie," he complained.

"Don't you remember what Mr. Howbridge told us about the Birdsall twins and the picture he sent out to the police? He showed us that, too."

"Jumping Jupiter!" gasped the amazed Neale. "Why—why, *she,*" pointing to the fisher-woman, "didn't say anything about the twins."

"Listen!" exclaimed Agnes again; and as Mrs. MacCall had taken the three younger children out of the shack, Agnes began to interrogate the woman as to the appearance of the strange girls who had remained for a week at the village on the ice.

Yes, they were both slim, and dark, and looked boyish enough—both of them. They seemed well behaved. She didn't believe Bob—

"I tell you I know," put in Bob from his corner. "One was a boy. He called the other by a girl name all right. Rowly—or Rowny—or sumpin'—"

"Rowena!" cried Agnes.

"Mebbe," admitted Bob.

"For the land of liberty's sake!" exclaimed his mother suddenly, "I'd like to know how you are so sure 'bout one bein' a boy?"

"Well, I'll tell you," grumbled Bob. " 'Cause he licked me! Yes, he did. Licked me good and proper. No girl could ha' done that, you bet!" said the disgruntled Bob.

"Now, Bob! I am ashamed of you!" said his mother.

"You needn't be. He could fight, that fellow!"

"But did you think they were both girls till you got into this fight?" Neale asked, now becoming interested.

"Bet you. We thought we could get some of their lines. They had more'n enough. We went over there to Manny Cox's shack, and she that was a girl was alone. So we took the lines."

"Now, Bob!" murmured his mother.

"Guess a constable here wouldn't be a bad thing after all," chuckled Neale.

"Go on," ordered Agnes.

"Why, that girl just cried and scolded. But the other one came back before me and Hank and Buddie got away."

"The one you think was a boy?" asked Agnes.

"One I know was a boy—since he fought me. He didn't do no cryin'. He squared right off, skirts an' all, and jest lambasted me. And when Hank tried to put in an oar, he lambasted him. Buddie run, or he'd 've been licked, too, I guess."

"Well!" exclaimed Bob's mother. "I never did! And you never said a word about it!"

"What was the use?" asked her son. "We was licked. And the next morning that boy-girl and

his sister was gone. We didn't see 'em no more."

"That is right," said the woman thoughtfully. "They got away jest like that. I never did know what become of 'em or what they went for."

Agnes dragged Neale out of the shack. She was excited.

"Let's find Mr. Howbridge!" she cried. "He ought to know about this. I just feel sure those twins have been here in this fisher-town."

CHAPTER X

INTO THE WILDERNESS

But the lawyer and guardian of the runaway Birdsall twins was not so easily convinced that Agnes had found the trail of the lost Ralph and Rowena. It seemed preposterous that the twins should have joined these rough fisherfolk and lived with them in the ice-village.

The party from Milton waited at the village for an hour while the lawyer cross-questioned the inhabitants. It was not that any of these people wished to hobble Mr. Howbridge's curiosity regarding the "stragglers," as they called the strangers who sometimes joined the community; but nobody had considered it his or her business to question or examine in any way the two unknown girls (if they were girls) who had occupied Manny Cox's shack for a week.

After all, the boy, Bob, and his mates, gave the most convincing testimony regarding the strangers. He was positive that one of the stragglers had been a boy—a very sturdy and pugilistic one for a twelve-year-old lad.

"And that might fit young Ralph Birdsall's reputation, as I got it from Rodgers, the butler,"

said Mr. Howbridge. "Ralph has to be stirred by Rowena to fight; but, once stirred, Rodgers says he can fight like a wildcat."

"Why, what a horrid boy!" murmured Tess, who heard this. "I guess I'm glad those twins didn't come with us after all."

"But, Mr. Howbridge," asked Ruth, "does it seem possible that they could get away up here alone?"

"That is difficult to say. Nobody knows how much money they had when they left Arlington. They might have come as far as this. If they had wished to, I mean."

It was getting quite dark, now, and the children were tired and hungry. The party could spend no more time at the fishing village. They set out across the ice for Coxford.

Neale took Dot pick-a-pack and Luke shouldered Tess, although the latter felt much embarrassed by this proceeding. Ruth had to urge her to remain upon the collegian's shoulder.

"Really, I'm quite too big to play this way," she objected.

But she was tired—she had to admit that. Sammy made no complaint; but his short legs were weary enough before they reached the shore.

Oil lamps on posts lit the few streets of Coxford. Most of the slab houses looked as though the wind, with a good puff, could blow them down. The forest came down to the edge of the village. If there should be a forest fire on this side of the

mountain range, the slab town would surely be destroyed.

Hedden, Mr. Howbridge's man, had prepared things here for the party, as well as at Culberton. On the main street of the little town was what passed for a hotel. At this time of year it was but little patronized.

Therefore the lawyer's man had chartered the house, as well as the family that owned it, to make the holiday vacation party comfortable over one night.

Roaring fires, hot supper, feather beds, and plenty of woolen blankets awaited the crowd from Milton at this backwoods hostelry. Mr. Dan Durkin, who was the proprietor of the Coxford Hotel, and his hospitable wife and daughters, could not do too much for the comfort of Mr. Howbridge and his friends.

"We don't have enough strangers here in winter time to keep us in mind of what city folks are like," the hotel-keeper declared. "When Miz' Birdsall was alive, she and her man and the kids used to come through here three-four times 'twixt the first snow flurries an' the spring break-up. They liked to see their camp up there in the hills durin' the winter. But after Miz' Birdsall died, he never came."

"And the children?" asked Mr. Howbridge, thoughtfully.

"They did come in summer," said Durkin; "but not in the winter."

"You haven't seen them of late, have you?" questioned the lawyer.

"Them twins? No. Nary hide nor hair of 'em. I tell you, ain't nobody—scurcely—gets up here this time o' year. 'Ceptin' a few stragglers for the fishin', perhaps. But we don't see them here at the hotel. We don't take in stragglers."

But he and his family, as has been said, did their very best for the party from Milton. The young folks slept soundly, and warmly, as well, and were really sorry to crawl out of the feather beds at seven o'clock the next morning when they were called to get ready for breakfast.

The cold and the long ride of the day before seemed to have done nobody any harm. The balsam-laden air, when they went to the hotel porch for a breath of it before breakfast, seemed to search right down to the bottom of their lungs and invigorate them all. Surely, as Neale had told Agnes, no tubercular germ could live in such an atmosphere.

"Just the same," said Ruth, wisely, when Agnes mentioned this scientific statement fathered by the ex-circus boy, "you children keep well wrapped up. What is one man's medicine is another man's poison, Mrs. Mac. often says. And it is so with germs, I guess. What will kill one germ, another germ thrives on. A bad cold up here will be almost sure to turn into pneumonia. So beware!"

"Don't keep talking about being sick," cried

Cecile. "You are almost as bad as Neighbor." "Neighbor" Henry Northrup lived next door to the Shepards and their Aunt Lorena, and was Luke's very good friend. "Neighbor is forever talking about symptoms and diseases. After a half hour visit with him I always go home feeling as though I needed to call the doctor for some complaint."

They made a hearty and hilarious breakfast of country fare—fried pork and johnnycakes, with eggs and baked beans for "fillers." Mrs. MacCall should not have tried to eat the crisply fried "crackling" as the farmers call the pork-rind; but she did. And one of the teeth on her upper plate snapped right off!

"Oh, dear me, Mrs. Mac!" gasped Agnes. "And not a dentist for miles and miles, I suppose!"

"Oh, well, I can get along without that one tooth."

"My pop's got a new set of false teeth," Sammy said soberly. "He's just got 'em—all new and shiny."

"What did he do with the old ones he had?" asked Tess, interested.

"Huh! I dunno. Throwed 'em away, I hope. Anyway," said Sammy, who had had much experience in wearing made over clothing, "mom can't cut them down and make me wear 'em!"

The jangling of sleighbells hurried the party through breakfast. The little folks were first out

upon the porch to look at the two pungs, filled with straw, and each drawn by a pair of heavy horses. The latter did not promise from their appearance a swift trip to Red Deer Lodge; but they were undoubtedly able to draw a heavy load through the deepest drifts in the forest.

They set out very gayly from the little lakeside town. It was not a brilliantly sunshiny day, for a haze wrapped the mountain tops about and was creeping down toward the ice-covered lake.

"There's a storm gathering," declared one of the men engaged to drive the Milton party into the woods. "I reckon you folks will git about all the snow you want for Christmas."

"At any rate, it won't be a green Christmas up here," Agnes said to Neale, who sat beside her in the second sled. "I don't think it is nice at all not to have plenty of snow over Christmas and New Year's."

"I'm with you there," agreed the boy. "But I'm glad I haven't got to shovel paths through these drifts," he added, with a quick grin.

They found the tote-road, as the path was called, quite filled with snow in some places. There were only the marks of the sleds that had gone up two days before with the servants and baggage and returned—these same two pungs in which the party now rode.

The drifts were packed so hard that the horses drew the sleds right over the drifts, without breaking through more than an inch or two with their

big hoofs. In some places they could trot heavily, jerking the sleds along at rather a good pace; but for most of the way the road was uphill, and the horses plodded slowly.

The boys got out now and then to stretch their legs. Agnes, too, demanded this privilege, and tramped along beside Neale after the sleds on the uphill grades. Mainly the party was warm and comfortable, and cheerful voices, laughter, and song rang through the spruce woods as they traversed the forest-clad hills.

Red Deer Lodge, it proved, was a long day's journey from the lakeside into the wilderness. Never before had the Corner House girls and their friends visited so wild a place. But they foresaw no trouble in store for them—not even from the gathering storm.

"Of course," Agnes said, when she was tramping on one occasion with the boys behind the second sled, "there must be bears, and wolves, and catamounts, and all those, in these woods in summer. But they are all hidden away for the winter now, aren't they, Neale?"

"The bears are holed up," he granted. "But the other varmints—"

"What are those?"

"That is what Uncle Bill Sorber calls most carnivorous animals," laughed Neale. "Creatures that prey—"

"Je-ru-sa-*lem!*" ejaculated the wide-eared Sammy. "You don't mean to say wild animals

pray, do you? I never knew they were that religious!"

"Good-*night!*" laughed Neale. "I mean those that prey on other animals—live on 'em, you know. *Prey* on 'em."

"Je-ru-sa-*lem!*" murmured Sammy. "Just like the fleas on my bulldog, Buster?"

"That's enough! That's enough!" groaned Neale. "No use trying to teach this boy anything."

"Huh!" grumbled Sammy Pinkney. "They make me learn enough in school. Don't you begin to pick on me out here in the woods, Neale O'Neil."

Just then Tom Jonah, who, his tongue hanging out, had been padding on ahead, suddenly uttered a loud bark and leaped out of the path. He went tearing away across the tops of the drifts and through the open wood through which the tote-road then passed.

Out of a close-branched spruce just ahead of the big dog shot a tawny-gray body, and a fearsome yowl drowned the barking of the dog. But the creature that had created Tom Jonah's excitement was running away.

"Call off that dog!" shouted the head driver. "Want him all chawed up?"

Tess stood up and began to scream for Tom Jonah to return. The old dog would obey her voice if no other.

"Oh! What *is* that?" cried Ruth.

"Link," said the driver, succinctly, as the beast uttered another angry howl which made the returning Tom Jonah turn to snarl in the stranger's direction.

"Oh!"

"He means *lynx*," said Mr. Howbridge.

"Don't, nuther," snorted the driver. "There's only one of him, so he's a link. If they was two or more they'd be links."

"Oh! Ah!" chuckled Luke Shepard. "And that one is now the 'missing link.' He was making tracks for the port of 'missing links' when he disappeared."

"He's goin' some. That dog give him a scare," admitted the driver, as a third and more distant yowl floated back to them from the depths of the forest.

The whole party, however, was impressed by the incident. More than Dot were disturbed by the thought of danger.

"Just the same," the smallest Corner House girl murmured in Tess' ear. "I'm *not* going to throw my Alice-doll overboard, either for wolfs or linkses—so there!"

CHAPTER XI

EMBERS IN THE GRATE

Mr. Durkin of the Coxford Hotel had furnished the party with a hearty lunch to eat while they were en route to Red Deer Lodge, and Ruth had brought two big thermos bottles of hot tea, likewise prepared at the hotel. The drivers had their own lunches, and at noon the party halted in the shelter of a windbreak to breathe the horses and allow them to eat their oats.

Mrs. MacCall and the older girls complained of stiffness from sitting so long in the sledges. Riding so far in the cold was not altogether pleasant; there was no sunshine at all now. The gathering storm had overcast the entire sky, and as they went on after lunch a rising wind began moaning through the forest.

"I don't see why the trees have to make such a meachin' noise," sighed Dot, as they climbed a steep hill so slowly that the rueful sound of the rising gale was quite audible.

"Where did you get such a word, Dot?" demanded Ruth, smiling at her.

"It is a good word. Uncle Rufus uses it," declared the smallest Corner House girl. "And Uncle Rufus never uses bad words."

"Granted," Ruth said. "But what does 'meachin' mean?"

"Why, just as though the wind felt bad and was whimpering about it," said Dot, with assurance. "It makes you all shivery to listen to it. And after we heard that link, and know that there are bears and wolfs about—O-o-oh! what's that, Ruthie?"

Something white had flashed right up in front of the noses of the first team of horses, and with great leaps broke away from the road. Tom Jonah was at the rear of the procession and did not at first see this bounding shape.

Neale stood up in the second sleigh and clapped his hands sharply together. The white ball stopped—halting right in a snow-patch; being so much like the snow itself in color that those in the sledges could scarcely see it. The sharp crack of Neale's ungloved palms seemed to make the creature cower in the snow. It halted for a moment only, however.

"Oh! The bunny!" gasped Tess, standing up to see.

"A big white hare," Mr. Howbridge said. "I had no idea there were such big ones around here."

The hare burst into high speed again and disappeared, almost before Tom Jonah set out for him.

"Come back, Tom Jonah!" shouted Tess. "Why, you couldn't catch that bunny if you had started ahead of him."

"Wow! that's a good one," said Neale O'Neil. "Tell you what, Aggie, those small sisters of yours are right full of new ideas."

"That is what teacher says is the matter with Robbie Foote," remarked Sammy, thoughtfully.

"How is that?" asked Agnes, expecting some illuminating information from the standpoint of a lower grade pupil.

"Why," Sammy explained, "teacher asked Rob what was the plural of man. Rob told her 'men.' Then, of course, she had to keep right on at it. If you do answer her right she goes right at you again," scoffed Sammy. "That's why I don't often answer her right if I can help it. It only makes you trouble."

"Oh! Oh!" chuckled Neale. "A Daniel come to judgment."

"Wait. Let's hear the rest of Sam's story," begged Agnes. "What was Robbie Foote's idea?"

"That's what teacher said—he was full of ideas, only they were silly," went on Sammy. "When he'd told her 'men' was the plural of 'man,' she said: 'What is the plural of child?' He told her 'twins.' What d'you know about that? She said his ideas were silly."

"I'm not so sure he was silly," laughed Neale.

"I wonder what has become of those Birdsall twins," Agnes said thoughtfully. "Up here in this wild country—"

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Neale. "You don't

know anything of the kind. Those two girls that fisher-woman spoke about—"

"One of them was a boy."

"Well, that doesn't prove anything. We don't even know that the two at the fisher-village were twins."

"But they were brother and sister roaming about—runaways and alone."

"Oh, Aggie!" he cried, "don't make up your mind a thing is so without getting some real evidence first. Mr. Howbridge asked, and he is not at all sure those stragglers were the twins."

"Somehow I just feel that they were," sighed the second Corner House girl, with a confidence that Neale saw it was useless to try to shake.

When Agnes Kenway made up her mind to a thing Neale wagged his head and gave it up.

The party was quite too jolly, however, to bother much about the lost Birdsall twins just then. Even Mr. Howbridge had said nothing about them since his cross-examination of the hotel-keeper back at Coxford.

If the twins had come this way, for instance, attempting to reach Red Deer Lodge, surely some of the people of Coxford or the woodsmen going back and forth on the tote-road would have met and recognized them. And if Ralph was dressed in some of his sister's clothing, they would have been the more surely marked.

Two girls of twelve or so traveling into the woods? It seemed quite ridiculous.

For this was indeed a wild country through which the tote-road ran. The fact of its being a wilderness was marked even to the eyes of those so unfamiliar with such scenes.

Now and then a fox barked from the brakes in the lowland. Jays in droves winged across the clearings with raucous cries. More than one trampled place beside the thickets of edible brush showed where the deer herd had browsed within stone's throw of the tote-road.

And then, as the party came closer to the ridge on which Red Deer Lodge was built, and the twilight began to gather, the big white owls of these northern forests went flapping through the tree-lanes, skimming the snowcrust for the rabbits and other small animals that might be afoot even this early in the evening.

The spread of the wings of the first of these monster owls that they saw was quite six feet from tip to tip, and it almost scared Dot Kenway. With an eerie "Hoo! Hoo! Hoo-oo!" and a swish of wings it crossed the road just ahead of the horses, and made even those plodding beasts toss their heads and prick up their ears.

"Oh, look at that 'normous great white chicken!" shouted Dot. "Did you ever?"

"It is an owl, child," said Tess.

"An owl as big as *that?*" gasped the smaller girl. "Why—why—it could carry you right off like the eagle that Mr. Lycurgus Billet set his Sue for bait! Don't you 'member?"

"I guess I do remember!" Tess declared. "But an owl isn't like an eagle. It isn't so savage."

The party had come a long way, and the steaming horses were now weary. As evening approached the cold increased in intensity, while the mournfully sounding wind promised stern weather. The members of the party from Milton began to congratulate each other that they were arriving at the Lodge before a big storm should sweep over this northern country.

"And suppose we get snowed in and aren't able to get out of the woods till spring?" suggested Cecile, not without some small fear that such might be a possibility.

"There goes little Miss Fidget!" cried her brother. "Always worrying over the worst that may happen."

"But I suppose we could be snowbound up here?" suggested Ruth, although scarcely with anxiety.

"Yes!" agreed Luke, laughing. "And pigs might fly. But they tell me they are awful uncertain birds."

"Don't listen to him, Ruthie," said Cecile. "We may have to stay here all winter long."

"Then I only hope Mr. Howbridge sent up grub enough to see us through till spring," put in the collegian gayly. "For I can foresee right now that this keen air is going to give me the appetite of an Eskimo."

It was a long climb to the top of the ridge on which the Birdsalls had built their rustic home. When the party came in sight of it the lamps were already lighted and these beckoned cheerfully to the arrivals while they were still a long way off.

The private road which had branched off from the regular tote-road at the foot of the ridge was easy to ascend beside some of the hills they had climbed. The teams, however, were not to be urged out of a walk.

There was a sudden flare of sulphurous light over the wooded caps of the mountains to the west of the ridge; but this lasted only a few minutes. The sun was then smothered in the mists as it sank to rest. Dusk almost at once filled the aisles of the forest.

On the summit of the ridge about the big, sprawling, rustic house only shade trees had been allowed to stand. The land was cleared and tilled to some extent. At least, there was plenty of open space around the Lodge and the log barns and the outbuildings.

Somebody was on watch, for the big entrance door opened before the sleds reached the steps, and yellow lamplight shone out across the porch. Hedden stood in the doorway, while another man ran down to assist with the bags and bundles.

"Oh, what a homelike looking place!" Ruth cried, quite as amazed as the other visitors by the appearance of the Lodge.

Aside from the fact that the house was built of round logs with the bark peeled off, it did not seem to be at all rough or of crude construction. There were two floors and a garret. The entrance hall seemed as big as a barn.

It was cozy and warm, however, despite its size. There was a gallery all around this hall at the level of the second floor, and a stairway went up on either side. At the rear was a huge fireplace, and this was heaped with logs which gave off both light and heat. There was a chandelier dropped from the ceiling, however, and acetylene gas flared from the burners of this fixture.

The whole party crowded to the hearth where benches and chairs were drawn up in a wide circle before the flames. The maids relieved Mrs. MacCall and the girls of their outer wraps and overshoes. The boys had been shown where they were to leave their caps and coats.

Such a hilarious crowd as they were! Jokes and cheerful gossip were the order of this hour of rest. With all but one member of the party! There was one very serious face, and this was the countenance of the youngest of the four Kenway sisters.

"Dorothy Kenway! what is the matter with you?" demanded Tess, at last seeing the expression on the face of her little sister.

Dot had been gazing all about the room with amazed eyes until this question came. Then with gravity she asked:

"Tessie! didn't Mr. Howbridge say this was a lodge?"

"Why, yes; this is Red Deer Lodge, child," rejoined Tess.

"But—but, Tess! you know it isn't a lodge, nor a room where they have lodges! Now, is it?"

"Why—why—"

"It can't be!" went on the smaller girl with great insistence. "You know that was a lodge where we went night before last to have our Christmas tree on Meadow Street."

"A *lodge?*" gasped Tess.

"Yes. You know it was. And there was a pulpit and chairs on a platform at both ends of the lodge. And lodges are held there. I know, 'cause Becky Goronofsky's father belongs to one that meets there. She said so. And he wears a little white apron with a blue border and a sash over his shoulder.

"Now," said the earnest Dot, "there's nothing like that here, so it's not a lodge at all. I don't see why they call it a red lodge for deers."

Tess would have been tempted to call on Mr. Howbridge himself for an explanation of this seeming mystery had the lawyer not been just then in conference with Hedden in a corner of the room. The butler had beckoned his employer away from the others.

"What is it, Hedden?" asked the lawyer. "Has something gone wrong?"

"Not with the arrangements for the comfort of

your party, Mr. Howbridge," the man assured him. "But when we came in here yesterday (and I unlocked the door myself with the key you gave me) I found that somebody had recently occupied the Lodge."

"You don't mean it! Somebody broken in? Some thief?"

"No, sir. I went around to all the windows and doors. Nobody had broken in. Whoever it was must have had a key, too."

"But who was it? What did the intruder do?"

"I find nothing disturbed, sir. Nothing of importance. But one room, at least, had been used recently. It is a sitting room upstairs—right near this main hall. There had been a fire in the grate up there. When we came in yesterday the embers were still glowing. But I could find no intruder anywhere about the Lodge, sir."

CHAPTER XII

MYSTERY AND FUN

Mr. Howbridge was evidently somewhat impressed by Hedden's report. He stared gravely for a minute at his grizzled butler. Then he nodded.

"Take me upstairs and show me which room you mean, Hedden," he said.

"Yes, sir. This way, sir."

He led the lawyer toward the nearest stairway. They mounted to the gallery. Then the man led his employer down a passage and turned short into a doorway. The room they entered was really on the other side of the chimney from the big entrance hall.

It was a small, cozy den. Mr. Howbridge looked the place over keenly, scrutinizing the furnishings before he glanced at the open coal grate to which Hedden sought to draw his attention first of all.

"Ah. Yes," said the lawyer, thoughtfully. "A work-basket. Low rocker. A dressing table. Couch. This, Hedden, was Mrs. Birdsall's private sitting room when she was alive. I never saw the house before, but I have heard Birdsall describe it."

"Yes, sir?"

"Mrs. Birdsall spent a good deal of her time indoors in this room, and the children with her. So he said. And you found live embers in the grate there?"

"Yes, sir," said the butler, his own eyes big with wonder.

"No other signs of anybody having been here?"

"Not that I could see," said Hedden.

"Strange—if anybody had been in here who had a key. Have you seen Ike M'Graw?"

"No, sir. The men who brought us up here said the man had gone away—had been away for a week, sir—but would return to-night."

"Then he was not the person who built the fire the embers of which you found. The coals would not have burned for a week. He is the person who has a key to the Lodge, and nobody else."

"Yes, sir."

"Whoever got in here, of course, either departed when you came, Hedden, or before. Did you notice any tracks about the house?"

"Plenty, sir. But only of beasts and birds."

"Ah-ha! Are the animals as tame as that up here?"

"There were footprints that the men from town assured me were those of a big cat of some kind, and there were dog footprints; only the men said they were those of wolves. They say the beasts are getting hungry early in the season, because of the deep and early snow, sir."

"Humph! Better say nothing to the children

about that," said Mr. Howbridge. "Of course, this party's being here will keep any marauding animals at a distance. We won't care for that sort of visitor."

"I think there is no danger, sir. I will tell the chef to throw out no table-scraps, and to feed that big dog we have brought in the back kitchen. Then there will be nothing to attract the wild creatures to the door."

"Good idea," Mr. Howbridge said. "And I will warn them all to-morrow not to leave the vicinity of the Lodge alone. When Ike M'Graw arrives we shall be all right. This vicinity is his natural habitat, and he will know all that's right to do, and what not to do."

Mr. Howbridge still looked about the room. The thing that interested him most was the mystery of the intruder who had built the fire in the grate. Mrs. Birdsall's sitting room! And the lawyer knew from hearing the story repeated again and again by the sorrowing widower, that the woman had been brought in here after her fall from the horse and had died upon the couch in the corner of the room.

He wondered.

Meanwhile the crowd of young people below were comforted with tea and crackers before they went to their bedrooms to change their clothes for dinner. Mr. Howbridge had brought the customs of his own formal household to Red Deer Lodge, and, knowing how particular the lawyer was, Ruth

Kenway had warned the others to come prepared to dress for dinner.

Mrs. MacCall, after drinking her third cup of tea, went off with the chief maid to view the house and learn something about it. The Scotch woman was very capable and had governed Mr. Howbridge's own home before she went to the old Corner House to keep straight the household lines there for the Kenways.

Her situation here at the Lodge was one between the serving people and the family; but the latter, especially the smaller girls, would have been woeful indeed had Mrs. MacCall not sat at the table with them and been one of the family as she was at home in Milton.

The girls were shown to their two big rooms on the second floor, and found them warm and cozy. They were heated by wood fires in drum-stoves. Ike M'Graw, general caretaker of the Lodge, had long since piled each wood box in the house full with billets of hard wood.

Neale and Luke and Sammy were given another room off the gallery above the main hall. There they washed, and freshened up their apparel, and otherwise made themselves more presentable. Even Sammy looked a little less grubby than usual when they came down to the big fire again.

It was black dark outside by this time. The wind was still moaning in the forest, and when they went to the door the fugitive snowflakes drifted against one's cheek.

"Going to be a bad night, I guess," Neale said, coming back from an observation, just as the girls came down the stairway. "Oh, look! see 'em all fussed up!"

The girls had shaken out their furbelows, and now came down smiling and preening not a little. Mr. Howbridge appeared in a Tuxedo coat.

"Wish I'd brought my 'soup to nuts,'" admitted Luke Shepard. "This is going to be a dress-up affair. I thought we were coming into the wilderness to rough it."

"All the roughing it will be done outside the house, young man," said Cecile to her brother. "You must be on your very best behavior inside."

Hedden's assistant announced dinner, and Mr. Howbridge offered his arm to Mrs. MacCall, who had just descended the stairway in old-fashioned rustling black silk.

Immediately Luke joined the procession with Ruth on his arm, and Neale followed with Agnes, giggling of course. Cecile made Sammy walk beside her, and he was really proud to do this, only he would not admit it. At the end of the procession came the two little girls.

They had not seen the dining room before. It was big enough for a banquet hall, and the table without being extended would have seated a dozen. There was an open fireplace on either side of this room. The acetylene lamps gave plenty of light. There were favors at each plate. There were even flowers on the table. Aside from the unplas-

tered walls and raftered ceiling, one might have thought this dinner served in Mr. Howbridge's own home.

They all (the older ones at least) began to realize how great a cross it would have been for the lawyer to take into his home in Milton two harum-scarum children like the Birdsall twins. If all tales about them were true, they were what Neale O'Neil called "terrors."

Such children would surely break every rule of the lawyer's well-ordered existence. And bachelors of Mr. Howbridge's age do not take kindly to changes.

"Think of bringing the refinements of his own establishment away up here into the woods for a three weeks' vacation!" gasped Cecile afterwards to Ruth.

To-night at dinner every rule of a well-furnished and well-governed household was followed. Hedden and his assistant served. The food was deliciously cooked and the sauce of a good appetite aided all to enjoy the meal.

And the fun and laughter! Mr. Howbridge and Mrs. MacCall enjoyed the jokes and chatter as much as the younger people themselves. Dot's discovery that this was not at all like the lodge room on Meadow Street delighted everybody.

"If you think that red deer ever held lodge meetings in this house, you are much mistaken, honey," Agnes told the smallest Corner House girl.

Tom Jonah was allowed to come in and "sit up" at table. The old dog was so well trained that his table manners (and this was Ruth's declaration) were far superior to those of Sammy Pinkney. But Sammy was on his best behavior this evening. The grandeur of the table service quite overpowered him.

When they all filed back into the hall, which was really the living room and reception hall combined, Tom Jonah went with them and curled down on a warm spot on the hearth. One of the men staggered in with a great armful of chunks for the evening fire. Hedden found a popper and popcorn. There was a basket of shiny apples, and even a jug of sweet cider appeared, to be set down near the fire to take the chill off it.

"Now, this," said Mr. Howbridge, sitting in a great chair with his slippered feet outstretched toward the fire, "is what I call country comfort."

"Whist, man!" exclaimed Mrs. MacCall. "'Tis plain to be seen you ken little about country comforts, or discomforts either. You were born in the city, Mr. Howbridge, and you have lived in the city most of your days. 'Tis little you know what it means to live away from towns and from luxuries."

"Why," laughed the lawyer, "I always go away for a vacation in the summer, and I usually choose some rustic neighborhood."

"Aye. Where they have piped water in the house, and electricity, an' hair mattresses. Aye.

I know your kind of 'country,' too, Mr. Howbridge. But when I was a child at home we lived in the real country—only two farms in the vale and the shepherds' cots. My feyther was a shepherd, you know."

"You must be some relation of ours, then, Mrs. MacCall," Luke said, smiling.

"Oh, aye. By Adam," said the housekeeper coolly. "I've nae doot we sprang from the same stock the Bible speaks of."

"Now will you be good?" cried Cecile, shaking a finger at her brother. "Go on, Mrs. MacCall. Tell us about your Highland home."

"Hech! There's very little to tell," said the housekeeper, shaking her head, "save that 'twas a very lonely vale we lived in, and forbye in winter. Then we'd not see a strange body from end to end of the snows. And the snow came early and went late.

"If we had not a grand oat bin and a cow in the stable we bairns would oft go hungry. Why, our mother would sometimes keep us abed in stormy weather to save turf. A fire like yon," she added, nodding toward the blazing pile in the chimney, "would have been counted a sin even in a laird's house."

"Ah, Mrs. MacCall," said the lawyer, "we're all lairds over here."

"Aye, that can pay the price can have the luxuries. 'Tis so. But luxuries we knew naught about where I was born and bred."

"I suppose the people right around us here—the residents of this neighborhood—have few luxuries," Ruth said thoughtfully.

"There aren't many neighbors, I guess," said Neale, laughing.

"But those people living in that fishing village—and even at Coxford—never saw a tenth of the things which we consider necessary at home," Ruth pursued.

"Suppose!" exclaimed Cecile eagerly. "Just suppose we were snowed in up here and could not get out for weeks, and nobody could get to us. I guess we would have to learn to go without luxuries! Maybe without food."

"Oh, don't suggest such a thing," begged Agnes. "And this cold air gives one such an appetite!"

"Don't mention a shortage of food," put in Neale, chuckling, "or Aggie will be getting up in the night and coming down to rob the pantry."

There might have been a squabble right then and there had not Hedden appeared, and, in his grave way, announced:

"Mr. M'Graw has arrived, sir. Shall I bring him in here?"

"Ah!" exclaimed the lawyer, waking up from a brown study. "Ike M'Graw? I understood from Birdsall that he is a character. Has he had supper, Hedden?"

"Yes, sir. I knew that you would wish him

served. He has been eating in the servants' dining-room, sir."

"Send him in," the lawyer said. "Now, young folks, here is the man who can tell us more about Red Deer Lodge and the country hereabout, and all that goes on in it, than anybody else. Here—"

The door opened again. Hedden announced gravely:

"Mr. Ike M'Graw, sir."

There strode over the threshold one of the tallest men the young people, at least, had ever seen. And he was so lean that his height seemed more than it really was.

"Why," gasped Neale to Agnes, "he's so thin he doesn't cast a shadow, I bet!"

"Sh!" advised the girl warningly.

They were all vastly interested in the appearance of Mr. Ike M'Graw.

CHAPTER XIII

THE TIMBER CRUISER

Mr. Howbridge got up from his chair and advanced to meet the backwoodsman with hospitable hand. The roughly dressed, bewhiskered forester did not impress the young folks at first as being different from the men who had driven the sledges to the camp or those who had brought the party up Long Lake in the ice-boats.

Ike M'Graw had an enormous moustache ("like that of a walrus," Cecile whispered), but his iron-gray beard was cropped close. His face was long and solemn of expression, but his gray eyes, surrounded by innumerable wrinkles, had a humorous cast, and were as bright as the eyes of a much younger person.

He seized Mr. Howbridge's hand and pumped it warmly. His grip was strong, and Mr. Howbridge winced, but he continued to smile upon the old man.

"Mr. Birdsall told me that if I wanted to know anything up here, or wanted anything done, to look to you, Mr. M'Graw," said the lawyer, as their hands fell apart.

"I bet he didn't say it jest that way, Mr. Howbridge," chuckled the man. "No. I reckon he

jest called me 'Ike.' Now, didn't he? And 'Old Ike,' at that!"

Mr. Howbridge laughed. "Well, he did speak of you in that way, yes," he admitted.

"I reckoned so," M'Graw said. "Yep, I'm 'Old Ike' to my friends, and what my enemies call me don't matter at all—not at all."

"I fancy you don't make many enemies up here in the woods, M'Graw," said Mr. Howbridge, waving the visitor to a comfortable seat before the fire.

"Nor friends, nuther," chuckled the man. "No, sir, there ain't sech a slather of folks up here to mix in with, by any count."

Before the woodsman took his seat the lawyer introduced him to Mrs. MacCall and to Ruth, individually, and to the rest of the group in general.

"Hi gorry!" exclaimed Ike M'Graw, "you've got a right big fam'ly, haven't you? You won't be lonesome up here—no, you won't be lonesome."

"And that is what I should think you would be," Mr. Howbridge said. "Lonesome. If you get snowed in you don't see anybody for weeks, I suppose?"

"Better say 'months,' Mister," declared M'Graw. "I've been snowed into my cabin back yonder in the valley from the day before Christmas till come St. Patrick's Day. That's right."

"I understood you lived near the Lodge, here, Ike?" said the lawyer.

"Oh, I do in winter, since Mr. Birdsall asked me to," the man said. "But sometimes—'specially when there was visitors up here—the population of this here ridge got too thick for Old Ike. Then I'd hike out for my old cabin in the valley."

Quickly Mr. Howbridge put in a query that had formed in his mind early in the evening:

"Have you been troubled with visitors up here this winter?"

"No, sir! It's been right quiet here, you might say."

"Nobody here at all until my party came yesterday?"

"Well, not many. Some timbermen went through for Neven. His company's got a camp over beyond the Birdsall line. Yes, sir."

"Strangers have not been here, then?"

"Why, no. Not to my knowledge," said M'Graw, with a keener look at the lawyer. "You wasn't meanin' nothin' special, was you? I've been away over to Ebettsville for a week. Nothin' stirring here before I went."

The conversation had become general again among the main party. Mr. Howbridge drew his chair nearer to the old man's ear.

"Listen," he said. "When my men came up yesterday and opened the house with the key I had given them, they found somebody had been in here not many hours before they arrived."

"How'd they know?"

"The fire had scarcely died out in one of the grates upstairs."

"Hum! Fire, eh? And I hadn't been inside this Lodge since b'fore Thanksgiving. Kinder funny, heh?"

"Yes."

"Anything stole?"

"Not a thing touched as far as we know. No other traces but the embers in that grate—"

"Hold on, Mister!" exclaimed M'Graw, but in a low voice. "What grate are you referrin' to? Which room was this fire in?"

Mr. Howbridge told him. The old man's face was curious to look upon. His brows drew down into a frown. His sharp eyes lost their humorous cast. Of a sudden he was very serious indeed.

"That thar room," he said slowly, and at length, "was Miz' Birdsall's."

"So I believed from the way it was furnished and from what Frank had told me of the house."

"Yes, Mister. That was her room. She thought a heap of sittin' in that room; 'specially in stormy weather. And the little shavers used to play there with her, too."

"Yes?"

"Them little shavers thought a sight of their mom," pursued M'Graw.

"I gathered as much from what Frank told me," Mr. Howbridge said seriously.

"By the way, Mr. Howbridge," said M'Graw in a different tone, "where are the little shavers?"

"You mean the twins, of course? Ralph and Rowena?"

"Yes, sir."

The guardian of the Birdsall twins rather hesitatingly told the old man just why he had not brought Ralph and Rowena to Red Deer Lodge at this time.

"Ran away? Now listen to that!" murmured the old man. "That don't sound right. Wasn't they with folks able to take keer of 'em?"

"I thought they were," said Mr. Howbridge. "Rodgers, the butler, and his wife."

"Whoof!" exclaimed the backwoodsman, expelling his breath in a great snort of disgust. "That butler! Wal, what for a man wants to buttle for, I don't know. I never could make it out that it was a real man's job, anyway. And that Rodgers was one useless critter. I don't blame them little shavers for runnin' away from Rodgers an' that sour-apple wife of his. I know 'em both."

"If that is the case," said the lawyer sadly, "I wish I had known them as well as you appear to. Then I should have made other provision for the twins right at the start."

"But shucks!" said M'Graw, suddenly grinning. "Them two little shavers will turn up all right. Ralph and Roweny are right smart kids."

"That may be. But we don't know where they have gone to. Of course, Ike, they couldn't have got up here to Red Deer Lodge, could they?"

"I don't know 'bout that," said the old man. "I reckon they could have got here if they'd wanted to. But I know well 'nough they didn't —not before I went away to Ebettsville a week ago."

"Of course not! Somebody would have seen them at Coxford. And then, if they had come here, where are they now?"

"That's right, Mister," agreed Ike M'Graw. "But—but who started that fire in the grate?"

"If it had been the children wouldn't they have been found here?"

"Mebbe. Tell you the truth"—and the old man's weather-beaten face reddened a little. "Well, to tell you the truth, when you spoke of the fire in the grate, I was some took aback. Miz' Birdsall bein' killed here. And she likin' that room so. And she finally dyin' in it—well, I don't know—"

"Ike! you are superstitious, I do believe," said the lawyer.

"Mebbe. But that never killed nobody," said the man. "And funny things do happen. Howsomever—Say!" he exclaimed suddenly, "how'd these folks that made the fire get into the house and out again?"

"Hedden, my man, says he found nothing broken or burst open. It must have been by the

use of a key. And the only key I knew of up here was yours, Ike."

"That's right," said the backwoodsman, nodding. "Mine's the only key up here."

"But the intruders couldn't have used that."

"Yes, they could, too! I didn't take it with me when I went away from here."

"Who would know where it was?"

"Anybody might have seen it that looked into my shack," admitted the old man. "I ain't in the habit of hidin' things. We don't have burglars up here, Mister. That key, and others, hung right on a nail beside my chimley-place. Yes, sir!"

"Then any person passing by could have found the key and entered the Lodge?" asked Mr. Howbridge.

"Only we don't have many folks passin' by," returned Ike thoughtfully.

"I can't understand it."

"It is a puzzle," admitted M'Graw. "Hi gorry! I ain't been to my shack yet since comin' back from Ebettsville. Mebbe the key ain't thar no more."

"To what door was it?" asked the lawyer.

"This here," replied M'Graw, jerking a thumb toward the main entrance. "Padlock on the outside of the door. All the other doors was barred on the inside. Oh, she was locked up hard and fast!"

"I don't understand it," said the lawyer.

"You look when you go home and see if the key is hanging where you left it."

"Hi gorry! I will," promised the backwoodsman. "I'd better bring the key over here tomorrow, anyway. And I reckon you want them figgers on the timber Neven wants to cut?"

"Yes. Of course, Ike, you have made no mistake in cruising the timberland?"

"I never make mistakes, Mister," said the old man. "That wouldn't do in the woods. The man that's brought up, as I was, with wildcats an' bears an' sech, can't afford to make mistakes. This was a lots wilder country when I was a boy from what 'tis now."

"I find that Neven's figures are very different from yours."

"Likely. And I reckon they're in his favor, ain't they?" and M'Graw chuckled. "Ye-as? I thought so. Well, you take it from me, Mister: I'm working for Birdsall's youngsters, not for Neven."

"I believe that to be a fact," the lawyer agreed warmly. "I have already told Neven that there are other companies that will make a contract with us if he doesn't care to accept your report."

"I b'lieve I know this Birdsall strip a leetle better'n any other feller in these parts. I've lived on it twenty year, and knowed it well before that time. I've seen some o' this timber grow. Reckon I ain't fooled myself none."

After that Mr. Howbridge drew the old man

into the general conversation. Ike approved vastly of the young people, it was evident. Agnes and the smaller children were popping corn. There were apples roasting on the hearth. The cider was handed about in glasses which one of the servants brought.

"We shall look to you for help in amusing these young people, Ike," Mr. Howbridge said. "Is it going to snow enough to-night to keep them indoors to-morrow?"

"No, no," the old woodsman assured them. "It's snowing some, but not much yet awhile. This here storm that's comin' has got to gather fust. We'll get a heavy fall, I don't doubt, in the end; but not yet. Like enough, 'twill be purty fair to-morrow."

Reassured by this prophecy, the little folks soon after went to bed. Nor were the older members of the party long behind them. They had had a long and wearying day, and the beds beckoned them.

CHAPTER XIV

BY THE LIGHT OF THE MOON

Ike M'Graw, the timber cruiser, was an excellent weather prophet; and this was proved to be a fact before all of those at Red Deer Lodge had gone to bed on this first night.

Neale O'Neil chanced to raise the shade of one of the windows in the boys' room before undressing, and exclaimed to Luke:

"Hey! who said it snowed? Look at that moon up there!"

Luke Shepard joined him and looked out, too, at the rather misty orb of night that peered through the breaking clouds. But little snow had fallen during the evening.

"Going to be a good day, just as that old codger said it would," agreed Luke. "My, how white everything is—really, silver! And a lonely place, isn't it?"

"You said it," agreed Neale. He was feeling in his pockets, and suddenly added: "Crackey! I've lost my knife."

"You had it down there peeling apples for the girls," said Luke, who was beginning to undress.

Sammy was already in bed and sound asleep. Neale started for the door.

"I don't want to lose that knife," he said. "I am going to run down and get it."

The serving people had gone to bed, but there were dim lights on the gallery and one below in the big hall. Neale ran lightly down the carpeted stairs on his side of the house. The light was so dim that he fumbled around a good while hunting for the missing knife.

Suddenly something clattered about his ears—some missiles that came from above, but were not much heavier than snowflakes, it would seem. Neale jumped, and then stared around.

He could not see a thing moving or hear anything. Where the white objects had come from he could not understand. Finally he found one that had rolled on the floor.

"Popcorn! Say! it's not snowing popcorn in here—not by any natural means," the boy told himself, immediately suspicious.

Suddenly he spied his knife, and he pocketed that. As he did so there came another baptism of popcorn. He dropped down below the edge of a table which stood in the middle of the room under the chandelier. All the light came from above, and there was not much of that; so it was dark under the table.

He heard a faint giggle. "Ah-ha!" thought Neale. "I smell a mouse! That is a girl's giggle."

He saw that the way to the foot of the stairs that were nearest the girls' rooms, was quite dark.

He ran out from under the table, but softly and on his hands and knees, and reached the stairway without making a sound.

The popcorn rattled again upon the table top, and once more he heard the giggle. He wormed his way up the stairs in the shadow and reached the gallery. Here a jet of gas from the side wall gave some light. He saw the robed figure hanging over the bannister and in the act of throwing another handful of popcorn at the spot where the boy was supposed to be crouching.

Neale O'Neil crept forward from the top of the stairs, still on his hands and knees. He was likewise in the shadow, although he could see the figure ahead of him plainly.

"Meow!" crooned the boy, imitating a cat with remarkable ingenuity. "Meow!"

"Oh, mercy!" hissed a startled voice.

"Ma-ro-o-ow!" urged Neale O'Neil, repeating his feline success.

"Mercy!" ejaculated the whisperer. "That's a strange cat."

"Ma-row-ro-o-ow!" continued Neale, with a lingering wail.

"Here, kitty! kitty! kitty!" murmured the girl crouching by the bannister. "Oh, where are you? Poor kitty!"

Immediately Neale changed his tone and produced a growl that not only sounded savage but seemed so near that the startled girl jumped up with a cry:

"Oh! Oh! Neale!"

"Ma-row-ro-o-ow! Ssst!" continued what purported to be a cat, and one that was very much annoyed.

"Oh! *Oh!* OH!" shrieked Agnes, springing up and leaning over the railing. "Neale! Come quick!"

And there Neale was right beside her! He appeared so suddenly that she would have shrieked again, and perhaps brought half the household to the spot, had not the boy grabbed her quickly and placed a hand over her mouth, stifling the cry about to burst forth.

"Hush!" he commanded. "Want to get Mrs. Mac or Mr. Howbridge out here to see what is the matter?"

"Oh, Neale!" sputtered Agnes. "I thought you were a cat."

"And I thought you were a hailstorm of popcorn."

"You horrid boy! To scare me so!"

"You horrid girl! To shower me with popcorn!"

"I don't care—"

"Neither do I."

Agnes began to giggle. "What were you doing down there?" she asked.

"I was looking for my pocketknife. Wouldn't lose it for a farm Down East with a pig on it!" declared the boy. "What are you doing out here?"

"I went to Mrs. Mac's room to give her her nightcap. It was in my bag. Oh, Neale! do you suppose it will be clear by morning, as that funny old man says?"

"It's clear now."

"You don't mean it?"

"Come along here to the window and look for yourself," the boy said, and led her toward the front of the house along the gallery.

There was a broad and deep-silled window over the front door of the Lodge. Neale drew back the hangings. They could see out into the night which was now all black and silver.

The forest that edged the clearing in which stood the Lodge was as black as ever an evergreen forest could be. The tops of the trees were silvered by the moonbeams, but the shadows at the foot of the trees were like ink.

In the open the new-fallen snow glittered as though the moonlight fell on precious stones. It was so beautiful a scene that for a moment Agnes could only grip Neale O'Neil's arm and utter an ecstatic sigh.

"Scrumptious, isn't it?" said the boy, understanding her mood.

"Lovely!" sighed Agnes. "Ruth and Cecile ought to see this."

"Hold on!" warned the boy. "Get them out here and we'll both be sent to bed in a hurry. Ruth's got her bossing clothes on—has had 'em on ever since we left Milton."

"Te-he!" giggled Agnes suddenly. "She feels her responsibility."

"Guess she does," chuckled Neale. "But there's no need to add to her troubles. Believe me! the less I am bossed around by her the better I like it."

"Oh, Neale," said Agnes, "she only does it for your good."

"Don't you fret," returned the boy, with a sniff. "I can get along without Ruth or anybody else worrying about whether I'm good, or not. Believe me!"

"Oh!" squealed Agnes suddenly. "What's that?"

"Huh! Seen a rat? Scared to death?" scoffed Neale O'Neil.

"Look at that thing out there! It's no rat," declared the girl eagerly.

Neale then looked in the direction she pointed. Not twenty yards from the house, and sitting on its haunches in the snow, was an object that at first Neale thought was a dog. The shadow it cast upon the moonlit snow showed pointed ears, however, and a bushy tail.

"Crackey, Aggie!" gasped Neale, "that's a fox."

"A fox? Right here near the house? Just like that?" gasped the girl. "Why—why, he must be wild!"

"Crackey!" returned Neale, smothering his

laughter, "you didn't suppose he was tame, did you?"

"But—but," stammered the girl, "if a wild fox comes so near the house, one of those dreadful lynxes may come—or a bear. I never! Why, we might be besieged by wolves and bears and wildcats. Did you ever?"

"No, I never was," scoffed Neale. "Not yet. But, really, I am willing to be. I'll try anything —once."

"I guess you wouldn't be so smart, young man, if the animals really did come here and serenade us. Why—"

"Listen! That fellow is serenading us now," declared Neale, much amused.

The sharp, shrill yap of the fox reached their ears. Then, from the rear of the house where Tom Jonah was confined in the back kitchen, the roar of the old dog's bark answered the fox's yapping.

And then from somewhere—was it from above and inside the house, or outside and in the black woods?—there sounded a sharp explosion. Agnes flashed a questioning glance at Neale; but the boy pointed, crying:

"Quick! Look! The fox!"

The little animal with the bushy tail that had raised its pointed nose to yap mournfully at the moon, had suddenly sprung straight up into the air. It cleared the snow at least four feet. One

convulsive wriggle it gave with its whole body, and fell back, a black heap, on the snow.

"Oh, Neale! what happened to it?" gasped Agnes, amazed.

"Shot," said the youth, a curious note in his voice.

"Oh, who shot it?"

"Ask me an easier one."

"Why—what—I think that was sort of cruel, after all," sighed the girl. "He wasn't really doing any harm."

"I thought you were afraid he might eat us all up," said Neale, dropping the curtain which he had been holding back, and turning away from the window.

"Oh—but—I am serious now," she said. "Who do you suppose shot him?"

"I could not say."

"That old woodsman, perhaps? There is none of our party out there with a gun, of course. Oh, dear! I hope I don't dream of it. I don't like to see things killed."

But the thought of dreaming about seeing the fox shot did not trouble Neale O'Neil when he parted with Agnes and went back to his room. Nor was it anything about the death of the creature that absorbed his attention.

It was who the huntsman was and from where the shot was fired that puzzled Neale O'Neil. Had the shot been made from outside or inside the house?

For it seemed to the boy that the explosion had been above their heads; and he chanced to know that none of the party from Milton—not even the servants—were quartered on the third floor of Red Deer Lodge.

Who, then, could be up there shooting out of one of the small windows at the yapping fox? He said nothing about this to Agnes; but he determined to make inquiry regarding it the first thing in the morning.

CHAPTER XV

A VARIETY OF HAPPENINGS

They were near the shortest day of the year and the sun rose very late indeed; so nobody at Red Deer Lodge got up early, unless it was the kitchen man who had to light the fires and bring in much wood. He tramped paths through the new-fallen snow to the outbuildings before sunrise. By the time Neale O'Neil, his head filled with the puzzling thoughts of the night before, reached the rear premises, the yard of the Lodge was marked and re-marked with footsteps.

He sought Hedden, however, having seen that the snow in front of the Lodge showed no foot-print. The fox lay just where it had been shot.

"Does any of our party sleep in the garret, Hedden?" Neale asked the butler.

"No, young man. We all have rooms at the back of the house."

The boy told the man about the shooting of the fox. "Of course, one of the men was not out with a small rifle, and plugged old Reynard when he was howling at the moon, was he?"

"No," replied the butler. "Neither John nor Lawrence knows how to use a gun, I'm sure. Perhaps it was that tall man, Ike M'Graw."

"Well, seems to me he ought to have come and got the pelt," said Neale, ruminatingly. "It's worth something all right, when furs are so high. Say, Hedden, how do you get upstairs into the garret?"

Hedden told him, presuming that it was merely a boy's curiosity that caused him to ask. But Neale had a deeper reason than that for wishing to find the way upstairs.

He could not understand from what angle the fox had been shot while he and Agnes were looking out of the window, if the hunter had been in the wood. There had been no flash or sign of smoke from the edge of the forest, and Neale's vision swept the line of black shadow for hundreds of yards at the moment of the report.

"Smokeless powder is all right," muttered the boy. "But they can't overcome the flash of the exploding shell in the dark. No, sir! That marksman was not in the wood. And the report sounded right over our heads!"

He said nothing more to Hedden, but found the upper stairs at the rear of the house. At the top was a heavy door, but it was not locked. He thrust it open rather gingerly, and looked into the great, raftered loft.

The sun was above the treetops now and shone redly into the front windows. There was light enough for him to see that as far as human occupants went, the garret of the Lodge was empty.

There was not much up here, anyway. Several

boxes, some lumber, and a heap of rubbish in one corner.

Neale O'Neil stepped into the place and walked to the front of the building. The windows were square and swung inward on hinges. He knew that this row of front windows was directly over that at which he and Agnes stood looking out upon the moon-lit lawn at bedtime.

The windows were all fastened with buttons. As far as he could see none gave evidence—at least on the inside—of having been recently opened. Neale shivered in the chill, dead air of the loft.

If the marksman that had shot the fox was up here, from which window did he shoot? Neale could not find any mark along the window sill or on the floor.

Suddenly the boy began opening the windows, one after the other. Some of them stuck, but he persisted until each one swung open. Outside the snow that had fallen the evening before lay in a fluffy layer on the window sill.

At the third window he halted. In this layer of light snow was a mark. Neale uttered a satisfied exclamation.

It was the matrix of a round tube—the barrel of the gun that had fired the shot which had finished Reynard, the fox!

"Can't be anything else," thought the boy. "He knelt right here and rested his gun across the sill. Yes! it points downward—pressed heavier at the outer end than near the window. Yes!"

The boy got down and squinted along the mark in the snow. His keen eye easily brought the huddled, sandy object on the snow down below into range.

"Now, what do you know about that?" Neale O'Neil asked aloud. "Who was up here with a gun last night and popped over that fox? I wonder if I ought to tell Mr. Howbridge."

Had he done so the lawyer would quickly have pieced together what Hedden had told him about the live embers in the grate and Neale's discovery. Whether he would have arrived at a correct conclusion in the matter, was another thing.

However that might be, Neale O'Neil was sure that somebody had access to the garret and had shot the fox therefrom. After the rear premises of the Lodge had been tracked up so before daylight, half a dozen people might have left the house by the rear door without their footprints being seen. If the marksman had no business in the Lodge he could easily have got away.

Puzzling over these thoughts, Neale descended to find most of the party before the fire in the living-room, waiting for breakfast. Agnes was eagerly telling of the fox she had seen shot at bedtime.

Neale added no details to her story, save that the fox still lay on the snow outside.

"Whoever hit him didn't care for the pelt," said the boy. "Now that it is frozen, it will be hard to skin. A fox hide is worth something.

I'm going to thaw out the body and try to save the skin—for Aggie, of course."

"Oh, my!" cried the beauty, "won't it be fine to have a collar or a muff made out of a fox that I saw shot with my own eyes?"

"Odd about that," said Mr. Howbridge thoughtfully. "I wonder who could have been so near the Lodge last evening. And then, to have left the fox there!"

The breakfast call interrupted him. Neale said nothing further about it. After the meal, however, the young people all got into their warm wraps and overshoes and went out of doors.

Tom Jonah was turned loose, and he almost at once dashed around the house to the spot where the body of the fox lay. The children gathered around the fuzzy animal in great excitement.

"Oh, it looks like Mrs. Allen's spitz dog—only this is reddish and Sambo, the spitz, is white," Tess said. "The poor—little—thing!"

"This is no 'expectorates' dog," chuckled Neale, grabbing the creature by the tail. "'Expectorates' is a much better word than 'spits,' Tess. Now, I am going to take this fellow and hang him up in the back kitchen where he will thaw out. No, Tom Jonah! you are not going to worry him."

"What lovely long fur!" murmured Agnes. "Do you suppose you can really cure the skin for me, Neale?" she demanded.

"What's the matter with the skin?" demanded Sammy, in wonder. "Is it sick?"

"Good gracious!" exclaimed Agnes. "These children have to be explained to every minute. I hope that fox skin has no disease, Sammy."

Luke and Ruth and Cecile had gone for a tramp through the wood. The little folks set to work building a snow man which was to be of wondrous proportions when completed. Naturally Neale and Agnes kept together.

Agnes had been wandering along the edge of the wood in front of the house while Neale carried the fox indoors. Tom Jonah came back with Neale and began snuffing about the spot where the fox had laid.

"See here, Neale O'Neil," cried Agnes, "I can't find anybody's footprints over here. Where do you suppose that man shot the fox from?"

"Humph!" grunted Neale noncommittally.

"But here's just the cunningest hoofprints! See them!" cried Agnes.

The boy joined her. Two rows of marks made by split-hoofed animals ran along the edge of the wood.

"Crackey!" ejaculated the boy. "Those are deer."

"You don't mean it?"

"Must be. Red deer, I bet. And right close to the Lodge! How tame these creatures are."

"Well, deer won't hurt us," said Agnes, decidedly. "Let's see where they went to."

Neale was nothing loath. One direction was as good as another. He wanted much to talk to

somebody about the discovery he had made in the loft of the Lodge; but he did not wish to frighten Agnes, so he did not broach the subject.

The two rows of hoof marks went on, side by side, along the edge of the clearing. They followed them to the very end of the opening which had been cleared about Red Deer Lodge—the northern end.

Here began a narrow path into the woods. The spoor of the two animals led into this path, and the boy and girl tramped along after them.

"I guess nothing frightened them," said Neale, "for they appear to be trotting right along at an easy gait. They must have passed this way in the night. And that's kind of funny, too."

"What is funny?" asked Agnes.

"Why, deer—especially two, alone—ought to have been hiding in some clump of brush during the night. They don't go wandering around much unless they are hungry. And there is plenty of brush fodder for them to eat along the edge of the swamps, that is sure."

"Are you sure they are deer?" asked Agnes. "They couldn't be anything else, could they?"

"I reckon not," laughed Neale. "I say! who lives here?"

They caught a glimpse of an opening in the forest ahead. Then a cabin appeared, from the chimney of which a curl of blue smoke rose into the air. There were several smaller buildings in the clearing, too.

"Guess we have struck that old timber cruiser's place," Neale said, answering his own question.

"Oh! Mr. Ike M'Graw!" cried Agnes. "Now we can ask him if he shot the fox last night."

"But where did these deer go?" exclaimed Neale, stopping on the edge of the little clearing and staring all around.

For here the tracks they had followed seemed to cross and criss-cross all about the clearing. That wild deer should frolic so about an occupied house was indeed puzzling. He saw, too, that there were human footprints over-running the marks of the split hoofs.

Suddenly from around the corner of the cabin appeared the long, slablike figure of the woodsman. He saw them almost immediately.

"Hullo, there!" he cried. "Ain't you out early? I wouldn't have been up near so early myself, if it hadn't been for those confounded shoats of mine."

"What happened to the pigs?" asked Neale, smiling.

"They broke out o' their pen. Always doin' that!" returned M'Graw. "Run off through the woods somewhere, and then come back and made sech a racket around my shanty that I can't sleep. Confound 'em!"

Neale suddenly saw a great light. He seized Agnes' hand and squeezed it in warning. With his other hand he pointed to the marks in the snow.

"Are those the pigs' footprints?"

"Yes. I just got 'em shut up again," said the woodsman. "Come in, won't you? I guess my coffee's biled sufficient, and I'm about to fry me a mess of bacon and johnnycake."

"What do you know about that?" murmured Neale to the giggling Agnes. "We followed those pig tracks for deer tracks. Aren't we great hunters—I don't think!"

CHAPTER XVI

THE KEY

The interior of Ike M'Graw's cabin was a place of interest to Neale and Agnes. There was not much room, but it was neat and clean. There were two bunks, one over the other at one end of the room. At the other end was the big, open fireplace.

There were andirons, a chimney crane for a pot, a dutch oven, and a sheet-iron shelf that could be pushed over the coals, on which the old man baked his johnnycake, or pan-bread.

The coffee pot was already bubbling on this shelf and gave off a strong odor of Rio. The bacon was sliced, ready for the frying pan. Ike wanted to cut more and give his two young visitors a second breakfast; but they would not hear to that.

"We'll take a cup of coffee with you," Agnes said brightly. "But I know I could not possibly eat another thing. Could you, Neale?"

"Not yet," agreed the boy. "And anyway," he added, with a smile, "if we are going to have a big storm as they say we are, Mr. M'Graw will need to conserve his food."

"Don't you fret, son," said M'Graw; "I've got

enough pork and bacon, flour, meal and coffee, to last me clean into spring. I never stint my stomach. Likewise, as long as I can pull the trigger of Old Betsey there, I shan't go hungry in these here woods. No, sir!"

Neale stepped to the rack in the corner where stood the brown-barreled rifle the woodsman called "Old Betsey," as well as a single and a double-barreled shotgun.

"Which of these did you use last night, Mr. M'Graw, when you shot that fox?" Agnes asked.

"Heh? What fox?"

"Maybe it wasn't you," said the Corner House girl. "But somebody shot a fox right up there in front of the Lodge."

"When was this?" demanded the old man, looking at her curiously.

Neale told him the time. The woodsman shook his head slowly.

"I was buried in my blankets by that time," he declared. "Are you sure the fox was shot, young feller?"

"I've got it hung up to get the frost out so I can skin it," said Neale quietly.

"Shot, eh?"

"Yes, sir."

"What sort of a ball killed it?"

"A small bullet. It was no large rifle bullet," said Neale confidently. "I should think it was no more than a twenty-two caliber."

"Pshaw! that's only a play-toy," returned the

old man. "Who'd have a gun like that up here in the woods? Guess you're mistook, young feller."

"When you come up to the house you take a look at the fox," said Neale.

"I'll do that. Where'd the feller stand when he shot the fox?"

"Why," put in Agnes, as Neale hesitated, "we couldn't find his footprints at all."

"Humph!" muttered the old fellow.

He poured out the coffee. The cups were deep, thick, and had no handles. He poured his own into the deep saucer, blew it noisily, and sipped it in great, scalding gulps. Agnes tried not to give this operation any attention.

Neale meanwhile was examining several fine skins hung upon the log walls. There was a wolf skin among them, and a big, black bear robe was flung over the lower bunk for warmth.

"I got him," said the woodsman, "five year ago. He was in a berry patch over against the mountain, yonder. And he was as fat as butter."

"And the wolf?" asked Agnes, with considerable interest.

"I trapped him. Last winter. He was a tremendous big feller," said M'Graw, heaping a tin plate with johnnycake and pouring bacon grease over it. "There's a small pack living up in the hills, and I'm likely to get more this winter. These heavy snows will no doubt be driving 'em down."

"Oh! Wolves!" gasped the girl.

"They won't bother you none," said M'Graw. "Don't go off by yourself, and if any of your party takes a long tramp, carry a gun. Like enough you'll get a shot at something; but not wolves. They're too sly."

The conversation of the old backwoodsman was both illuminating and amusing. And his hunting trophies were vastly interesting, at least to Neale.

There was a big photograph on the wall of Ike and another man standing on either side of a fallen moose. The great, spoon-shaped horns of the creature were at least six feet across.

"You'll see that head up over the main mantelpiece up to the Lodge," said M'Graw. "That's Mr. Birdsall. He an' me shot that moose over the line in Canady. But we brought the head home."

Over his own fireplace was a handsome head—that of a stag of the red deer.

"Got him," Ike vouchsafed between bites, "down in the east swamp, ten year ago come Christmas. Ain't been a bigger shot in this part of the country, I reckon, 'ceptin' the ghost deer Tom Lawrence shot three winters ago over towards Ebettsville."

"Ghost deer!" exclaimed Neale and Agnes together.

"What does that mean?" added the boy.

"Surely you don't believe there are spirits of deer returned to earth, do you, Mr. M'Graw?" asked Agnes, smiling.

M'Graw grinned. "Ain't no tellin'. Mebbe there is. I'm mighty careful what I say about ghosts," he rejoined. "But this here ghost deer, now—"

He had finished breakfast and was filling his pipe. "Lemme tell you about it," he said. "I will say, though, 'twasn't no spirit, for I eat some of the venison from that ghost deer.

"But for two seasons the critter had had the whole of Ebettsville by the ears. The hunters couldn't get a shot, and some folks said 'twas a sure-enough ghost.

"But if 'twas a ghost, it was the fust one that ever left footprints in the snow. That's sure," chuckled M'Graw. "I went over there with Old Betsey once; but never got a shot at it. Jest the same I seen the footprints, and I knowed what it was."

"What was it?"

"Looked like a ghost flying past in the twilight. It was an albino—white deer. I told 'em so. And fin'ly Tom Lawrence, as I said, shot it. Why they hadn't got it before, I guess, was because them that shot at it shivered so for fear 'twas a ghost they couldn't hit the broad side of a barn!" and M'Graw broke into a loud laugh.

"I did not know that deer were ever white," Agnes said.

"One o' the wonders of nature," Ike assured her. "And not frequent seen. But that critter was one—and a big one. Weighed upwards of

two hundred pound. Tom give me a haunch, and when it was seasoned some, 'twasn't much tougher than shoe-leather. *Me,* I kill me a doe when I want tender meat. My teeth is gettin' kind of wore down," chuckled the old man.

"Was it really all white?" asked Neale.

"Well, that buck's horns an' hoofs was considerable lighter in color than ordinary. With them exceptions, and a few hairs on the forehead and a tuft on the hind leg, that critter was perfectly white. Queer. Jest an albino, as I said," M'Graw concluded between puffs.

Beside the chimney on a big nail driven into a log, hung a string of rusty keys, with one big shiny brass one by itself. Agnes said:

"I guess you have to lock everything up when you leave home, don't you, Mr. M'Graw?"

"Me? Never lock a thing. We don't have no tramps. And if I leave home I always leave a fire laid and everything so that a visitor can come right in and go to housekeeping. It's a purty mean man that'll lock up his cabin in the woods. No, ma'am. I never lock nothin'."

"But those keys?" the Corner House girl suggested curiously.

"Oh! Them? Just spare keys I picked up. All but this," and he reached for the brass key briskly. "This is the key to the Lodge padlock. I'm goin' to take it up to that Mr. Howbridge of yours and tell him something about it. I'll walk back with you."

He slipped into his leather jacket and buckled up his leggings. Then banking the fire on the hearth, he said he was ready to go. He put the big brass key in his pocket, but as he had intimated, he left the cabin door unlocked.

Once outside, they saw that the sun was clouded over again. "That storm is surely a-coming," Ike observed. "I shouldn't wonder, when it does get here, if it turns out to be a humdinger. 'Long threaten, long last,' they say."

When they arrived at the Lodge the old man took a look at the fox Neale had hung up. He examined the small hole under the ear where the bullet had gone into the animal's head.

"Nice shot," he muttered. "Dropped him without a struggle, I reckon. And you sure are right, boy," he added to Neale. "It was a twenty-two. Nothin' bigger. Humph! mighty funny, that.

"Well, you let it hang here and I'll skin it for you before I go back home. Fust off I want to see your Mr. Howbridge."

As M'Graw went through the hall to find the lawyer, Neale and Agnes were called by Luke from one of the sheds. His voice and beckoning hand hurried them to the spot.

"What do you know about this?" cried Luke. "Here are two perfectly good sleds—a big one and a smaller. And one of those drivers that have just started back for Coxford, told me where there was a dandy slide."

"Crackey, that's fine!" agreed the eager Neale.

Agnes, too, was delighted. The other girls were eager to try the coasting.

"But we must get away without the children. It is too far for them to go," Ruth said. "At least, we must try it out before we let them join us."

"They are all right at the front with their snow man. I just saw them," Agnes said. "Come on!" Agnes was always ready for sport.

They started away from the house, the two boys dragging the bobsled. There were about four inches of fluffy, dry snow on top, and under that the drifts were almost ice-hard.

"Ought to make the finest kind of sledding," Luke declared.

Meanwhile Ike M'Graw had found Mr. Howbridge reading a book in a corner of one of the comfortable settees in the big living-room. He dropped the book and stood up to greet the woodsman with a smile.

"How are you, this morning, M'Graw?" asked the lawyer. "How about the key?"

"Here 'tis," said the guide. "Found it just where it should be. Looked as though it had never been touched since I was gone. But, of course, as I tell you, anybody might have been in my cabin. I don't lock nothin' up."

"If the key was used, it was by somebody who knew it was the key and where to find it," Mr. Howbridge said reflectively.

"You struck it there," agreed Ike. "And there's only two keys to that big padlock. Unless there's been one made since Mr. Birdsall died," he added.

"If anybody borrowed the key and got in here, they got out again and locked the front door and returned the key."

"So 'twould seem. You say there wasn't no marks in the snow when your folks fust came?"

"No."

"It snowed the day after I went away from here to Ebettsville. They must have come here and gone before that snow then. That snow covered their tracks. How's that?"

"Not so good," the lawyer promptly told him. "You forget the live embers in the grate. Those embers would not have stayed alive for five days."

"Ain't that a fac'?" muttered the old man.

They pondered in silence for a moment.

Hedden suddenly entered the room. He seemed flurried, and his employer knew that something of moment had occurred.

"What is the matter, Hedden?" the latter asked.

"I have to report, sir, that somebody has been at the goods in the pantry—the canned food and other provisions that we brought up."

"What do you mean?" asked Mr. Howbridge curiously.

"The chef, sir, says that quite a good deal of food has been stolen. He put the stuff away,

There is a lot of it gone, sir—and that since last night at dinner time."

"Humph! Isn't that strange?" murmured the lawyer.

M'Graw grunted and started for the front door.

"Where are you going, M'Graw?" asked Mr. Howbridge.

"I'm going to find out who shot that fox," was the woodsman's enigmatical answer.

CHAPTER XVII

ALL DOWN HILL

The party of young people with the bobsled was very merry indeed just as soon as they got out of hearing of the Lodge. By striking into a path which opened into the wood right behind the barns, they cut off any view the two little girls and Sammy Pinkney might have caught of their departure.

"I feel somewhat condemned for leaving them behind," Ruth said. "Yet I know it is too far for such little people to go along and get back for lunch."

"Oh, they are having a good time," Cecile said. "You make yourself a slave to your young family, Ruthie," and she laughed.

"We will make it up to the kids," Luke joined in. "After we have tried the slide they can have a shot at it."

"That's all right," grinned Neale O'Neil. "But if Tess Kenway thinks she has been snubbed or neglected—well! you will not hear the last of it in a hurry, believe me."

This part of the wood into which the young people had entered was a sapling growth. Not many years before the timber had been cut and

there were only brush clumps and small trees here now.

Flocks of several different kinds of birds—sparrows, buntings, jays, swamp robins, and others—flew noisily about. There were berries and seeds to be found in the thickets. The birds had begun to forage far from the swamps—a sign that the snow was heavy and deep in their usual winter feeding places.

"The dear little birdies!" cooed Agnes, waving her gloved hand at a flock that spread out fanwise in the covert, frightened by the approach of the young people.

Suddenly there arose a vast racket—a whirring and trampling sound, as though it were of runaway hoofs. Agnes shrieked and glanced about her. The other girls looked startled.

"That horse! It's running away!" cried Agnes. "Oh, Neale!"

"Shucks!" said that youth, scornfully. "'The dear little birdies!' Ho, ho! I thought you liked 'em, Aggie?"

"Liked what?" she demanded, as the noise faded away into the wood.

"The birdies. That was a flock of partridges. They can make some noise, can't they? Food in the swamps must be getting mighty scarce, or they would not be away up here."

"Who ever would have thought it?" murmured Cecile. "Partridges!"

"Wish I had a gun," said Luke.

"Don't be afraid. They won't bite," chuckled Neale O'Neil. "And we won't be likely to meet anything much more dangerous than birds in the day time."

"Yet we saw that big cat yesterday," Ruth said.

"It ran all right. We might have brought Tom Jonah; only he was playing with the kids," said Neale. "Anyway, the best he would do would be to scare up creatures in the thickets that we otherwise would not know were there."

"Now, stop that, Neale O'Neil!" cried Agnes. "Are you trying to frighten us?"

"Shucks, Aggie!" he returned. "You know the kind of wild animal we scared up this morning when we found Ike M'Graw's place."

"Oh! Oh!" cried Agnes, with laughter.

"What's the joke?" asked Luke.

So Neale told the rest of the party how he and Agnes had followed the footprints of the "deer" clear to the old man's cabin.

"And there we could hear them squealing in their pen," was the way Neale finished it.

"Two mighty hunters, you!" chuckled Luke.

The road over which they dragged the sled soon became steep. They were now climbing a long hill through heavier timber. It was a straight path, and the crown of the ascent was more than a mile from Red Deer Lodge.

Half way up they passed a fork in the timber road. The roads were not rutted at all, for they

were full of firm snow. This second road dipped to the north, running down the steep hill and out of sight.

"That chap who told me about this slide told me to 'ware that road," Luke said. "Around that curve he said it was steep and there'd be no stopping the sled for a long way. If we stick to the right track, we'll slide back almost to the Lodge itself."

"That'll help some," Cecile said. "I am getting tired tramping over this snow. It's a harder pull than I imagined it would be."

"We were very wise not to let the children come," Ruth remarked.

Uphill for all of a mile was, in truth, no easy climb.

Agnes and Neale O'Neil began to bicker.

"I'm no horse," said Neale rather grumpily, when Agnes suggested that the boys could drag the girls on the sled.

"No; your ears are too long," she retorted impishly.

"Now, children!" admonished Ruth. "How is it you two always manage to fight?"

"They're only showing off," chuckled Luke Shepard. "In secret they have a terrible crush on each other."

"Such slang!" groaned his sister.

"Real college brand," said Agnes cheerfully. "I do love slang, Luke. Tell us some more."

"I object! No, no!" cried Ruth. "She learns

quite enough high-school slang. Don't teach her any more of the college brand, Luke."

They puffed up the final rise and arrived at the top of the ascent. This was the very peak of the ridge on which Red Deer Lodge was built.

Because it was winter and all but the evergreens and oaks were denuded of leaves, they could see much farther over the surrounding landscape than would have been possible in the leafy seasons; however, on all sides the forest was so thick at a distance that a good view of the country was not easily obtained.

The valley toward the north was black with spruce and hemlock. One could not see if there were clearings in the valley. It seemed there to be an unbroken and primeval forest.

This valley was included in the Birdsall estate, and the timber which the Neven Lumber Company wished to cut practically lay entirely in that wild valley.

The hills to the west were plainly visible. Their caps were either bald and snow covered, or crowned with the black-green forest. Toward the lakeside the slopes were alternately tree covered and of raw stumpage where the timber had recently been cut. These "slashes" were ugly looking spots.

"That is what all that part yonder of this estate will look like when the lumbermen get through," said Ruth. "Isn't it a shame?"

"But trees have to be cut down some time. I

heard M'Graw say that much of the timber on this place was beginning to deteriorate," Luke said in reply.

"Shucks!" exclaimed Neale O'Neil, "if a tree is beautiful, why not let it stand? Why slaughter it?"

"There speaks the altruistic spirit of the young artist," laughed Luke. "Ask Mr. Howbridge. How about the money value of the tree?"

"Shucks!" Neale repeated, but with his eyes twinkling. "Is money everything?"

"Let me tell you, boy," said Luke a little bitterly; "it buys almost everything that is worth while in this world. I want beautiful things, too; but I know it will cost a slew of money to buy them. I am going to set out and try for money first, then!"

"Hear the practical youth!" said Cecile. "That is what he learns at college. Say! aren't we going to slide downhill? Or did we come up here to discuss political economy?"

Luke, holding up his hand in affirmation, declared: "I vow to discuss neither polit, bugs, pills, psyche, trig—"

"Oh, stop!" commanded Ruth, yet with curiosity. "What are all those horrid sounding things?"

"Pshaw!" cried the collegian's sister, "I know that much of his old slang. 'Trig' is trigonometry, of course; 'psyche' is psychology; 'pills' means physics; 'bugs' is biology; and 'po-

lit,' of course, is political economy. Those college boys are awfully smart, aren't they?"

"I want to sli-i-ide!" wailed Agnes, stamping her feet in the snow. "I am turning into a lump of ice, standing here."

"Get aboard, then," answered Neale.

She plumped herself on the sled. Luke straddled the seat just behind the steering wheel. The other girls took their places in rotation after Agnes, while Neale made ready to push off and then jump on himself at the rear.

"Ready?" he cried.

"Let her go!" responded the steersman.

"Hang on, girls!" commanded Neale, as he started the sled with a mighty shove.

The bobsled moved slowly. The runners grunted and strained over the soft snow that packed under them and, at first, retarded the movement of the sled. But soon the power of gravitation asserted itself. Neale settled himself on the seat. The wind began to whistle past their ears. In front a fine mist of snow particles was thrown up.

Faster and faster they rushed down the descent. The young people had thought this trail very smooth as they climbed it; but now they found there were plenty of "thank-you-ma'ams" in the path. The bobsled bumped over these, gathering speed, and finally began to leave the snow and fairly fly into the air when it struck a ridge.

The girls screamed when these hummocks ar-

rived. But they laughed between them, too! It was a most exciting trip.

Like an arrow the sled shot past the fork in the road, keeping to the left. But it would have been a very easy matter, as Luke Shepard saw, to turn the sled into the steeper descent.

They started up a gray and white rabbit beside the path, and it raced them in desperate fright for several hundred yards, before it knew enough to turn off the road and leap into the brush. Luke's head was down and his eyes half closed as he stared ahead. But Neale gave voice to his delight in reëchoed shouts.

There were slides in Milton. The selectmen gave up certain streets to the young folk for coasting. But those streets were nothing like this.

On and on the bobsled flew, its pace increasing with every length. Although this woodroad was in no place really steep, the hill was so long, and its slant so continuous that the momentum the sled gathered carried it over any little level that there might be, and at the foot of the decline still shot the merry crew over the snow at a swift pace and for a long distance.

Indeed, when the sled stopped they were almost at the back of the Red Deer Lodge premises. A mellow horn was calling them to lunch when they alighted.

"Oh! wasn't it bully?" gasped the delighted Agnes. "I never did have such a sled-ride!"

"How about your trip up the lake?" Cecile asked.

"Oh! But that scooter was different."

The other girls were quite as pleased with the slide as Agnes; and the three ran into the house to dress for lunch, chattering like magpies, while the boys put the sled away under the shed.

When Luke and Neale went into the house they found Ike M'Graw skinning the fox in the back kitchen, Tom Jonah being a much interested spectator. The woodsman beckoned Neale to him.

"Look here, young feller," he said. "You seen this critter shot last night, you say?"

"Yes," replied the boy.

"Where was it shot from? I'm derned if I can find any place where the feller stood along the edge of the woods to shoot him."

"No. I couldn't find any footprints either," Neale confessed.

"Not knowing from which direction the bullet came—"

"Oh, but I do know that, Mr. M'Graw. I am pretty positive, at least. I have been doubtful whether to say anything about it or not—and that's a fact."

"What d'you mean?" demanded the old man, eyeing him shrewdly.

"Well, I thought when I heard the shot and the fox was killed that the explosion was right over my head."

"What's that? Over your head! In the attic?"

"That is where the shot came from—yes."

"Air you positive?" drawled the old man.

"I went up there this morning and saw the place where the fellow had rested the barrel of his gun across the window sill to shoot."

"My! My!" muttered Ike thoughtfully. "And there wasn't nobody up there this morning?"

"No. And I asked Hedden, and he said neither of the other men knew how to use a gun and that they all were in bed at the time the fox was shot."

"Do tell!" muttered the woodsman. "Then they—well, the feller that shot the fox was up there in the attic about bedtime, was he?"

"Yes. Who do you suppose he was, Mr. M'Graw?" asked Neale curiously.

"Well, I wouldn't want to make a guess. This here man workin' in the kitchen tells me that there wasn't a foot mark in the snow at all when he got up and went out of the back door here the fust time this morning. And, of course, there wasn't no footprints at the front of the house, was there?"

"Oh, no! Not until after breakfast time."

"Uh-huh! Well, after this John had tramped back an' forth to the woodshed and the like half a dozen times, anybody could have gone out of here without their footprints being noticed. Ain't that a fac'?"

He said this to himself more than to Neale, who had become vastly interested in the subject. He eagerly watched the old man's weather-beaten face.

Suddenly the woodsman raised his head and looked at Neale thoughtfully. He asked a question that seemed to have nothing at all to do with the subject in hand.

"What kind of a dog is this here Tom Jonah?" Ike demanded. "Ain't he got no nose?"

CHAPTER XVIII

FIGURING IT OUT

Of course Ike M'Graw could see for himself very easily that Tom Jonah had a nose. It was pointed just then at the fox pelt in the old woodsman's hands, and was wrinkled as the dog sniffed at the skin.

So Neale O'Neil knew that the man meant something a little different from what he said. He, in fact, wanted to know if Tom Jonah was keen on the scent, and Neale answered him to that end.

"We think he's got a pretty good nose, Mr. M'Graw, for a Newfoundland. Of course, Tom Jonah is not a hunting dog. If he runs a rabbit he runs him by sight, not by scent. But give him something that one of the children wears, and he'll hunt that child out, as sure as sure! They play hide and seek with him just as though he were one of themselves—only Tom Jonah is always 'it.'"

"Uh-huh?" grunted the old man. Then he said: "Don't seem as though any stranger could have come down from the attic and got through that hall yonder without this dog making some sort of racket."

"I never thought of Tom Jonah," admitted Neale.

"He was in here all night, they tell me," went on Ike.

"Yes. But didn't the kitchen man, John, let him out when he first came downstairs this morning?"

"No. I asked him. He said the dog didn't seem to want to go out. He opened that door yonder into this back kitchen and called the dog. This here dog come to the door, but he did not want to go out and turned away. So John shut the door again."

"Crackey!" exclaimed Neale. "Then there was somebody in here, and don't you forget it, Mr. M'Graw!"

"Uh-huh? But why didn't the dog give tongue? Was it somebody the dog knowed? You see, son, there's been food stole from that pantry yonder durin' the night. Could it be the feller that shot the fox from the attic winder was right in here when John called the dog, loadin' up his knapsack with grub?"

"Why—why—"

"This dog must ha' knowed him—eh?"

"I—I suppose so. But who could it be?" demanded Neale with wondering emphasis. "Surely it was none of our servants. And Luke Shepard and Sammy and I were in bed in one room. The girls—Mr. Howbridge—Mrs. MacCall—"

"I guess," said the old man, grinning, "that the lady and that lawyer man can be counted out of it. None of you brought a twenty-two rifle with you, anyway."

"No."

"That's what the fox was shot with. Here's the pellet," and Ike brought the little flattened lead bullet out of his vest pocket. "If it hadn't been a good shot—spang through the brain—'twould never have killed the fox. He had his head on one side, yappin', and that bullet took him right.

"Now, better keep still about this. No use frightening the ladies. Girls an' women is easy frightened, I expect. I'll speak again to Mr. Howbridge about it. But this here dog—"

He shook his head over Tom Jonah's shortcomings, while Neale ran away to wash his hands and face before appearing at the lunch table.

The children around the table were in something of an uproar. Mrs. MacCall and Ruth were obliged to be firm in order to quiet Sammy, and Tess, and Dot.

For Agnes, unable to keep anything to herself, had blurted out all about the lovely sled-ride the older ones had enjoyed. Immediately the three younger children decided that they had been cheated.

"We wanted to go tobogganing, too," Tess declared.

"I just *love* sliding downhill," wailed Dot.

"Huh!" sniffed Sammy Pinkney. "A feller can't have no fun where there's big fellers and big girls. They always put you down, and leave you out of the best things."

"You shall go sliding to-morrow if the snow holds off," Ruth promised.

"Why not this afternoon, Ruthie?" begged Tess.

"Sister's got something else to do this afternoon. Wait until to-morrow," the oldest Kenway replied.

"It's snowing already," muttered Sammy disconsolately.

There were a few flakes in the air. But it did not look as though any heavy fall had begun.

"I don't see why we need to have you go with us to slide," Tess said, pouting. "We go sliding without you in Milton."

"This is different, Tess," Ruth said firmly. "Now, let us hear no more about it! You will annoy Mr. Howbridge."

Sammy winked slyly at the two little girls. "Just you wait!" he mouthed so that only Tess and Dot heard him.

"Oh, Sammy!" murmured Dot. "What'll you do?"

"Just you wait!" repeated the boy, and that mysterious statement comforted Dot a good deal, if it did not Tess Kenway. Dot believed that Sammy was fertile in expedient. She had run away with him once "to be pirates."

Before the meal was over, Hedden came in and bent beside Mr. Howbridge to whisper into his ear.

"Oh! Has he come back again? I wondered where he went so suddenly," said the lawyer. "Yes. Tell him I'll come out to see him as soon as I am through."

Neale knew that he referred to M'Graw. Bright-eyed and interested, he bent forward to say to Mr. Howbridge:

"I just told Mr. M'Graw something that I guess you'd wish to know, too, Mr. Howbridge. May I go with you when you speak to him?"

"Certainly, my boy. There's nothing secret about it—not really. We are only puzzled about a suspicion that we have—"

"That there was somebody in the house that ought not to be here," whispered the boy.

"That's it. How did you know?"

"I'll tell you later," returned Neale O'Neil.

Agnes was glaring at him in a most indignant fashion. It always angered the second Corner House girl if Neale seemed to have any secret that she did not share.

"What's the matter with you?" she hissed, when Neale turned away from their host. "Don't you know it isn't polite to whisper at table, Neale O'Neil?"

"What are you doing it for, then?" he asked her, grinning, and would vouchsafe no further ex-

planation of the secret between Mr. Howbridge and himself.

As soon as the lawyer arose from the table to go out to the kitchen to interview Ike, Neale jumped up to go with him. Agnes saw him depart with sparkling eyes and a very red face. She was really angry with Neale O'Neil.

The boy was too much interested in the mystery of the shooter of the fox and how he had got in and out of Red Deer Lodge to be much bothered by Agnes' vexation. He and the lawyer found the old woodsman sitting in the servants' dining-room where he had been eating.

"Well, sir," he began, when Mr. Howbridge and the boy entered, " 'twixt us all, I reckon we're gettin' to the bottom of this here mystery. Did I tell you I couldn't find no place where the feller stood out there in the snow last evening to shoot that fox from?"

"No."

"But it's a fac'. Now you tell him, sonny, what you told me about what you found in the attic. I've been up and made sure 'twas so."

Neale told the surprised Mr. Howbridge of the proved fact that the fox was shot from one of the attic windows.

"And 'twas a play-toy rifle that done it—a twenty-two," said the woodsman, as though to clinch some fact that had risen in his own mind, if not in the minds of the others.

"Now, let's figger it out. We got enough fac's now to point purty conclusive to who done it. Yes, sir."

"Why, Ike, I don't see that," observed Mr. Howbridge.

"But you will, Mister, in a minute or so," declared the old man, nodding with confidence. "Now, look you: Whoever was in this here house and made that fire in Miz' Birdsall's sittin'-room, was here when your people came day before yesterday."

"No!" ejaculated Mr. Howbridge.

"Yes!" repeated M'Graw with decision.

"But you found that key in your cabin, did you not?"

"Yes. But I tell you I've figgered that out. Whoever 'twas come here, got the key, come in here, opened the back door, and then locked the front door on the outside same as always."

"But—"

"Wait! No buts about it," interrupted the woodsman. "I got it figgered to a fare-you-well, I tell you. Now! The feller locked the front door, went back to my shanty and hung up the key, and then came back in by the rear door. See? He—ahem!—was in here when that man, Hedden, of yours, and the others, come."

"But there were no footprints of human beings about the house in the snow."

"That's all right. The feller that built the fire upstairs had done all his walking around before

the snow fell the day after I went to Ebettsville. Don't you see? He didn't leave here because his footprints would be seen, and he couldn't lock the house up behind him if he did leave and make it look as though it had never been opened."

"You are guessing at a lot of this!" exclaimed the lawyer, not at all convinced.

"No. I'm jest figgerin'. Now, this Neale boy here heard that shot fired upstairs that killed the fox. He went up this mornin' and saw where the shot was fired from. I seen it, too. So the feller that opened the Lodge and that lit the fire was up there at ten or half past last evening, for sure."

"Well?" murmured the lawyer.

"He didn't go out during the night, or his footprints would have been seen by John this morning in the new-fallen snow."

"That sounds right."

"It is right!" said the old man vigorously. "Now we come to this here dog you brought."

"Oh, yes!" cried Mr. Howbridge. "How about Tom Jonah? Surely if there had been a stranger about—one who stole food from the pantry—he would have interfered."

"Mebbe he would. And mebbe again he wouldn't. He's a mighty friendly dog."

"But he is a splendid watchdog," interposed Neale O'Neil.

"That may be, too," Ike said, quite unshaken in his opinion. "If anybody had come in from

outside and undertaken to disturb anything, that old dog would probably have been right on the job."

"I see your point," Mr. Howbridge admitted. "But this person who came down from the garret must have been a stranger."

"Now we're gittin' to it. Let's figger some more," said M'Graw, with a chuckle. "If you think hard, an' figger close enough, I guess 'most any puzzle can be solved."

CHAPTER XIX

SAMMY TAKES THE BIT IN HIS TEETH

M'Graw began slowly to fill his pipe. Mr. Howbridge saw that it was useless to hurry him, so he smiled at Neale and waited. When the tobacco was alight to suit him, Ike continued his "figgerin'."

"When this here dog," he said, looking at Neale in turn, "is at home, I guess he knows everybody in the neighborhood, don't he?"

"Yes. But surely, you don't think anybody from Milton is up here at Red Deer Lodge, except just these people that Mr. Howbridge brought?"

"Hold on. I'm doin' the askin'. You just answer me, sonny," chuckled Ike. "Now, let's see. He does know lots o' folks—especially young folks—around where he lives when he's at home, don't he?"

"Why, Tom Jonah," said Neale, "knows every boy and girl that comes past the old Corner House. He's a great friend of the kids."

"Jest so," said M'Graw, as Mr. Howbridge started and was about to speak. But the woodsman put up a hand and said to the lawyer: "Wait a minute. This man, Hedden, has looked

over the stuff you brought up here in the line of canned goods and sech. He says what was stole was mostly sweets—canned peaches, an' pears, an' pineapple, an' sugar-stuff, besides condensed milk. Jest what children would like."

"The twins!" exclaimed Mr. Howbridge. "Do you think it could be possible, after all, Ike?"

"Goodness!" gasped Neale.

"Looks mighty like children's work," said the woodsman reflectively. "I knowed little Ralph had a twenty-two rifle. I taught him to shoot with it. He does me proud when it comes to shootin'. Yes, sir."

"But to get clear up here—"

"Them is purty smart children," said the old man. "And it looks, as I say, like their work. Who else would give themselves dead away by shootin' that fox out of the winder? No grown person would have done that if they didn't want to be caught in the house.

"Then, Ralph and Rowena would have knowed where that key hung. They'd be more'n likely to build the fire in their ma's sittin'-room. Now, when they sneaked out o' the house this mornin', they'd take just this kind of stuff that's been took from the pantry."

"I see. I see."

"And the dog clinches it. He's a friend to all children. He'd never have stopped them, especially as they was in the house and didn't come from outside."

"I believe you are right," admitted Mr. Howbridge.

"I'm great on figgerin'," said the woodsman. "Now, let's see what sort of a nose that there dog's got."

"You mean Tom Jonah?"

"Yes. I ain't got no dog. There ain't none nearer'n Sim Hackett's beagle at Ebettsville that's wuth anything on the trail. Them youngsters must have gone somewhere, Mr. Howbridge. And they can't be fur off. We've got to find 'em before this here storm that's breedin' comes down on us. There must be tracks somewheres, and a trail a good dog can sniff."

"I understand what you mean. But how shall we start the dog on their trail? We have nothing the twins have worn," said Mr. Howbridge.

"Let's look around," suggested Ike. "Upstairs in that sittin'-room, where you found the live coals—or, your man did—there's a closet where some of the twins' clo'es used to hang. Mebbe there's some there now. If that there dog has got a nose at all, an' he sniffed them children good this mornin', he'll know the smell of 'em again. Yes, sir."

"That is a good idea," admitted Mr. Howbridge. "You go out and see if you can find any impressions of the children's feet in the snow, Ike. I will hunt in the rooms upstairs for something the twins may have worn."

"Stockin's are best—stockin's that ain't been

washed," said the woodsman. "Or mittens, or gloves. Come on, sonny," he added to Neale O'Neil. "You come with me and we'll try to find some trail marks in the snow." He glanced at the window. "And we've got to hurry. It's snowin' right hard now, and will smother marks and ev'rything if it keeps on this way for long."

Just then, while there was so much interest being felt in the Birdsall twins and the possibility of their having been at Red Deer Lodge, somebody should have felt a revived interest in three other children—Sammy Pinkney and the two youngest Corner House girls.

They had gone out after lunch, presumably to continue the building of the snow man in front of the Lodge. The older girls and Luke were engaged in their own matters, and thought not at all of the little folks. But Sammy, Tess and Dot had quite tired of playing in the snow.

"They're awful mean not to have taken us slidin' with them," declared Sammy, sitting on the front step and making no effort to continue the work of snow man building.

"I love to slide," repeated Dot, sadly.

"And now it's going to snow," said Tess, biting her lip. "If it snows a lot we can't slide tomorrow."

"Awful mean," reiterated Sammy. "Say! Aggie said there was a small sled back there where they found the big one. Let's go and see it."

Any idea seemed good to the disappointed little

girls. Even just looking at the sled they could use, if nothing happened, was interesting. They followed Sammy.

But Sammy had more in his mind than just the idea of looking at the sled. Only, from past experience, he knew that to get Tess and Dot Kenway to leave the path of rectitude took some sharp "figuring." So he, like Ike M'Graw, was exercising his faculties.

They came to the shed.

"Oh, what a nice sled!" cried Dot, as Sammy drew out a shiny sled, big enough for three or four little folks, and with a steering arrangement in front.

"It's a better sled than the one I have at home," admitted Sammy.

"I guess we could slide all right on that," said Tess slowly.

"Guess we could!" agreed the boy.

"I'd like a ride on it," said Dot wistfully.

"Get on, kid. Me and Tess will drag you," said Sammy.

Dot overlooked the objectionable way in which Sammy had addressed her and hurried to seat herself on the sled. Sammy and Tess took hold of the rope. It was not very hard to pull such a light body as that of the fairylike Dot through the soft snow.

Sammy wisely turned away from the Lodge and followed the tracks of the bobsled. In two minutes they were out of sight of the Lodge, and even

of the sheds. At that time Neale and the old woodsman had not come out for the purpose of searching the vicinity of the Lodge for the footprints of the Birdsall twins.

Sammy and the two smallest Corner House girls moved up the woods path which the other sledding party had found and followed. If Ruth and the others had gone this way, surely they could safely follow the same route. Although the snow was increasing, even the cautious Tess Kenway saw no danger menacing the trio.

But at first she had no idea just what Sammy had determined upon. In fact, Sammy Pinkney had taken the bit in his teeth, and he was determined to do exactly what they had been forbidden to do. If the older ones could slide downhill, why could he and the little girls not have the same pleasure?

He and Tess drew Dot for a long way, much to that little girl's delight. Then the uphill grade tired Tess so much that she had to stop.

"Shift with Dot," Sammy said. "Come on, Dot. You and I will drag Tess a piece."

The little girl was willing, and she and her sister changed places. Dot could not do much to aid Sammy, but he buckled down to the work and pulled manfully.

When he had to stop, puffing, they were then so far up the hill that his suggestion that they keep on to the top and slide back, met with even Tess' approval.

"We've come so far, we might's well finish it," she said.

"Well, I hope it isn't much farther," said Dot, "for it's awful hard walking in this snow. And it's snowing harder, too."

"Don't be a 'fraid-cat, Dottie," snorted Sammy. "I never saw such a girl!"

"Am not a 'fraid-cat!" declared the smallest Corner House girl, prompt to deny such an impeachment. "Snow don't hurt. But you can't see where you are going when it snows so thick."

"Shucks!" said Sammy. "We can't get lost on this road, can we, Tess?"

"No-o," agreed Tess. "I guess we can't. We can't get off the path, that's sure. And we can see the marks the big sled made all the way."

These tracks, however, were rapidly being effaced. The children were not cold, for as the snow increased it seemed to become warmer, and the hard walking helped to keep them warm.

They had to put Dot back on the sled and draw her the final two or three hundred yards to the top of the hill. There, fast as the snow was gathering, they could see where the other coasters had turned the bobsled around and prepared to launch themselves from the top of the hill.

"I guess they slid almost all the way home," said Tess, with some anxiety. "I hope we can do as well, Sammy."

"Sure," agreed Sammy. "Ain't no need to worry about that. Now I'm goin' to lie right

down, and Dot can straddle me. Then you push off and hang on at the back end of the sled, Tess. Don't you kids fall off."

"I wish you wouldn't call me a kid, Sammy Pinkney," complained Dot. "And don't wiggle so if I've got to sit on you."

"Well, I got to get fixed," Sammy rejoined. "Hang on now. All ready, Tess?"

"Yes. My! how the wind blows this snow into your face."

"Put your head down when we get started. I've got to keep lookin' ahead. Bet this is a dandy slide—and such a long one!"

"Here we go!" cried Tess, pushing with vigor.

The sled started. It seemed to slide over the soft snow very nicely. She scrambled on, and, sitting sideways, clung with both hands to the rails. Dot was hanging to Sammy's shoulders.

"Choo! Choo! Choo! Here we go!" yelled Sammy, wriggling with eagerness.

"*Do* keep still, Sammy!" begged Dot.

But the sled did not gain speed. The gathering snow impeded the craft even on the down grade.

"Kick! Kick behind, Tess!" yelled Sammy. "Kick *hard*."

"I—I am kicking," panted his friend. "Why don't the old thing go better?"

"This snow is loadin' right up in front of it," sputtered Sammy. "It's too de-e-ep! Aw—shucks!"

The sled almost stopped. Then it went over a

thank-you-ma'am and slid a little faster. The slide was nowhere near as nice as they had expected. Why! they were not going downhill much faster than they had come up.

The snow was sifting down now very thickly, and in a very short time the trio was likely to have to drag the empty sled through deep drifts. Even Sammy was secretly sorry they had come such a long way from the Lodge. Although it was barely mid-afternoon, it seemed to be growing dark.

They struggled to make the sled slide, however; neither Sammy nor Tess was a child who easily gave up when circumstances became obstinate. Tess continued to dig her heels into the snow, and when the sled almost stopped, Sammy plunged his arms elbow deep into the snow to aid in its movement.

But suddenly they went over a hummock. It seemed a steep descent on the other side. In spite of the gathering snow the sled got under better headway.

"Hurrah, Tess!" yelled Sammy. "We're all right now."

"I—I hope so!" gasped the older girl.

"Oh! Oh!" shrieked Dot. "We're going!"

They really were going—or, so it seemed. Faster and faster ran the sled, for the hill had suddenly become steep. It was snowing too thickly for any of them to notice that this part of the track was entirely new to them.

They shot around a turn and took another dip

toward the valley. Sammy did not mind the snow beating into his face now. He yelled with pleasure. The little girls hung on, delighted. The sled sped downward.

All marks of the bobsled's runners were long since lost under the new snow. The hill grew steeper. Sammy's yells were half stifled by the wind and snow.

It did seem as though that slide was a very long one! In climbing the hill the trio had had no idea they had walked so far. And how steep it was!

Over a level piece the sled would travel at a moderate rate, and then shoot down a sudden decline that almost took their breath. Surely they must have traveled almost to the Lodge from which they had started.

Finally the path became level. Great trees rose all about them. They could see but a short distance in any direction because of the falling snow.

The sled stopped. The girls hopped off and Sammy struggled to his feet and shook the snow out of his eyes.

"Je-ru-sa-*lem!*" he choked. "What a slide! Did you ever, Tess?"

"No, I never did," admitted Tess quite seriously.

"Oh!" cried Dot. "Let's go home. I'm co-co-o-old. Why—why—" she gasped suddenly, looking about on all sides.

"Well, don't cry about it," snorted Sammy.

"Of course we'll go home. We must be almost there now—we slid so far."

"Oh, yes. We *must* be near Red Deer Lodge," agreed Tess.

It did not look like any place they had ever seen before. The trees were much taller than any they had noticed about the Lodge. Yet there was the open path ahead of them. They set Dot upon the sled again, and Tess helped Sammy drag it and her sister straight ahead. Somewhere in that direction they were all three sure Red Deer Lodge was situated.

CHAPTER XX

FOLLOWING ANOTHER TRAIL

After all the activities of the forenoon both by the older boys and girls of the vacation party at Red Deer Lodge, and by the children as well, the soft snow was considerably marked up by footprints around the premises.

Ike M'Graw and Neale O'Neil, searching for prints of the feet of those who they thought had left the vicinity of the house early that morning, struck directly off for the edge of the clearing.

"The best we can do," M'Graw declared, "is to follow the line of the woods clean around the clearing. Somewhere, whoever 'tis got that fox and lifted the canned goods, must have struck into the woods. They ain't hidin' in the barns or anywhere here. I've been searchin' them. That's certain."

Neale had very bright eyes, and not much could escape them; but the snow was coming down fast now and even he could not distinguish marks many yards ahead.

Here and there they beheld footprints; but always examination proved them to be of somebody who belonged at the Lodge. The prints in the snow Luke and his sister and Ruth had made soon

after breakfast fooled Neale for a moment, but not for long.

They saw the woodsman's big prints, too, where he had been looking for the marks of the fox hunter. There were the marks Neale himself and Agnes had made when they had followed the "deer."

All these various marks bothered the searchers; and all the time, too, the snow was falling and making the identification of the various prints of feet the more difficult.

"This here's worse than nailing the animals that they say went into the ark that time Noah set sail for Ararat," declared Ike, chuckling. "Whoever followed them critters up to the gang-plank must have been some mixed up—

"Hello! What's this?"

They had come around behind the sheds. Here was the entrance to the road on which Neale and Luke with the three older girls had coasted that forenoon. The woodsman was pointing to marks in the snow, now being rapidly filled in. Neale said:

"Oh, we were sliding on this hill, you know."

"Uh-huh? Who was?"

"Five of us. With a big bobsled."

"Now, you don't tell me that bobsled made them marks," interposed the old man. "I know that bobsled."

"Why—I—"

"Them runner marks was made by little Ralph

Birdsall's scootin' sled. I know that, too. Who's gone up to slide this afternoon?"

"That must be the kids!" exclaimed Neale. "I wonder if Ruth knows they are out here playing! I remember now I didn't see them at the front of the house."

"You don't suppose they've gone far?"

"Oh, I guess they will come to no harm around here. Ruth would not let them go away from the Lodge to play."

"Humph!" muttered the old man.

But he went on. There was really no reason for Neale to be worried about the children. They were almost always well behaved. At least, they seldom disobeyed.

Besides, it was only a few minutes later when Mr. Howbridge, well muffled against the storm, appeared with Tom Jonah on a leash. The old woodsman had just got down on his knees in the snow to examine two lines of faint impressions that left the path John's footprints had made to the farther shed.

"Now, what's this? A deer jumped out here—or what?"

Neale waited and Mr. Howbridge held the dog back. Ike got up and followed the half-filled impressions a little farther. They headed directly for the thicker woods to the north of the Lodge premises.

"Might have been feet—small feet. And two sets of 'em," said Ike. "Hi, Mister! did you find

anything up in that closet belongin' to the twins?"

"Here is a pair of bed slippers. Knitted ones. They are much too small for a grown person," the lawyer declared.

M'Graw took the articles thoughtfully into his big hands. "Humph! Look like little Missie's slippers. Certainly do. Roweny, you know. Wonder if this old dog knows anything."

He offered the slippers to Tom Jonah to sniff. The dog had been used to following a scent in times past; often they would send him after Dot or Tess or Sammy. He snuffed eagerly at the knitted shoes.

"Don't know how strong the scent is on 'em. It's been some time, p'r'aps, since little Roweny wore 'em. But—"

Tom Jonah whined, sniffed again, and then lifted up his muzzle and barked, straining at the leash.

"Looks like he understands," said the old man, reaching for the leash and taking the bight of it from Mr. Howbridge's hand. "Good dog! Now, go to it. These here footprints—if that's what they are—are fillin' in fast."

Tom Jonah put his nose to the marks in the snow. He sniffed, threw some of the light snow about with his nose, and started off. He followed the faint trail into the woods. But Neale doubted if the dog followed by scent.

Once in the thicket the marks were only visible here and there. The fresh snow was sifting down faster and faster. The dog leaped from one spot

to another, whining, and eagerly seeking to pick up the scent.

"It's awful unlucky this here snow commenced as it has. Hi! I don't see what we can do," sighed Ike.

"Do you really believe those marks were the twins' footsteps?"

"I do. I believe they was in the house when your folks came, Mr. Howbridge," M'Graw said. "But now—"

Tom Jonah halted, threw up his shaggy head, and howled mournfully.

"Oh, don't, Tom Jonah!" cried Neale O'Neil. "It sounds like—like somebody was dead!"

"Or lost, eh?" suggested Ike. "Ain't no use. He—nor a better dog—couldn't follow a scent through such snow. We're too late. But I'd like to know where them children went, if these is them!"

They turned back toward the Lodge, rather disheartened. If the two Birdsall children, who had been left to the care of Mr. Howbridge, were really up here alone in the wilderness—and perhaps shelterless at this time—what might not happen to them? What would be the end of this strange and menacing situation?

Nobody spoke after M'Graw expressed himself until they came to the path on which they had previously seen the marks of the small sled and the footprints of Sammy and the two youngest Corner House girls. These traces were now en-

tirely obliterated. It was snowing heavily and the wind was rising.

"Hi gorry!" ejaculated the old woodsman, "how about those other children? Are they at home where they ought to be?"

"Whom do you mean?" asked the lawyer, rather startled.

But Neale understood. He looked sharply about. Not an impression in the snow but that of their own feet was visible.

"I'll go and see if the sled is returned to the place they got it from," he said, and dashed away to the shed.

Before Mr. Howbridge and M'Graw had reached the Lodge Neale O'Neil came tearing after them.

"Oh, wait! Wait!" he shouted. "They haven't come back with the sled. What do you suppose can have happened to Sammy and Tess and Dot?"

CHAPTER XXI

ROWDY

About the time Neale O'Neil was asking his very pertinent question about the whereabouts of Sammy and Tess and Dot, that trio had stopped, breathless and not a little frightened, in a big drift at what seemed the bottom of a deep hole.

The snow swirled about them so, and they seemed to have come so far down from the place where they had pushed off on the sled, that they believed it was a deep hole; and there seemed no possibility of getting out of it.

"I—I guess," quavered Dot, "that we'll just have to lie right down here and let the snow cover us all—all up."

"I do wish, child, when you get into trouble that you wouldn't give up all hope, right first off!" exclaimed Tess, rather exasperated at her sister. "Of course we are not going to give up and lie down in this snow."

"Of course not!" echoed Sammy Pinkney.

Nevertheless, Sammy experienced a chill up and down his spine, and the short hairs at the back of his neck stiffened. It was borne upon his mind all of a sudden that they were lost—utterly lost! He could not understand how they had got off of

the straight path to Red Deer Lodge; but he was very sure that they had done so and, as far as he knew, they were miles and miles away from that shelter and from their friends.

Yet there seemed nothing to do but keep on through the snow—as long as they could press forward. Tess was quite as plucky as he made believe to be. And they could haul Dot a little way at a time on the sled.

"But we're going on, Sammy, without getting anywhere," was Tess' very wise observation. "I think we ought to scrouge down under something until the snow stops."

"Just like the Babes in the Woods," wailed Dot, who knew all the nursery stories.

"Do be still!" cried her sister, quite tartly. "Sammy and I are going to find you a nice place to stop, Dot."

"Well, I hope it's a place with a fire in it, 'cause I'm cold," complained the smallest Corner House girl.

They all wished for a fire and shelter, but the older ones feared with reason that both comforts would not be immediately found. Sammy had not ventured forth this time prepared for all emergencies, as he had the time that Dot and he ran away to sail piratically the canal. He had no means of making a fire, even if he could find fuel.

Sammy was not without fertility of ideas, however; and these to a practical end. It must never be said of him, when the lost party got back to Red

Deer Lodge, that he had not done his duty toward his companions.

He saw that the lower branches of some of the big spruce trees swept the snow—indeed, their ends were drifted over in places. Under those trees were shelters that would break both the wind and the snow. He said this to Tess, and she agreed.

"But we must keep a hole open to look out of," she said. "Otherwise we won't see the folks when they come hunting for us."

"Je-ru-sa-*lem!* If they come along this road while it's snowing like this lookin' for us, we'd never see 'em," muttered the boy.

But he kept this opinion to himself. Vigorous action claimed Sammy Pinkney almost immediately. While Dot "sniffled," as he called it, on the half-buried sled, Sammy started to dig under the boughs of a tree near at hand.

The wind seemed to be less boisterous here, but the snow was drifting rapidly. Back of the tree the steep hillside rose abruptly, somewhat sheltering the spot.

Sammy burrowed through the drift like a dog seeking a rabbit. He found a way between two branches of the spruce, over which the snow had packed hard at a previous fall. He had to break away fronds of the tough branches to open a hole into the dark interior.

"Come on!" he shouted, half smothered by the snow he was pawing out. "Here's a hole."

"Oh, Sammy! suppose there should be something in there?" gasped Tess, her lips close to his ear.

At this suggestion Master Sammy drew back with some precipitation.

"Aw, Tess! what d'you want to say such things to a feller for?" he growled. "If there is anything in there we'll find it out soon enough."

Dot's sharp ears had heard something of this. She shrieked:

"Oh! Is it mice? I am afraid of mice, and I won't go in there till you drive them all out, Sammy."

"Je-ru-sa-*lem!*" murmured Sammy, with vast disgust. "Don't girls beat everything?"

"I don't care! I don't like mice," reiterated the smallest Corner House girl.

"Huh!" declared Sammy, wickedly, "maybe there'll be wolves under there."

"Wolfs? Well, I haven't my Alice-doll here, so I don't care about wolfs. But mice I am afraid of!"

At that Sammy took a deep breath, gritted his teeth, and dived out of sight. He found that there was quite a sharp incline over hard snow to the bottom of the hole. All around the trunk of the tree, and next to it, was bare, hard ground. It made a roomy shelter, and it was just as warm as any house could be without a fire.

There was a quantity of dry and dead branches under here to scratch him and tear at his clothing.

Sammy broke these off as he crawled around the tree, making the way less difficult for the little girls when they should enter.

A little light entered by the hole down which he had plunged. It made the interior of the strange shelter of a murky brownness, not at all helpful in "seeing things."

Sammy was quite sure there was no wolf housed in here; but about the mice or other small rodents he was not so sure.

However, he called to the little girls cheerfully to come down, and Dot immediately scrambled in, feet first. Tess followed her sister with less precipitation. Like Sammy, she felt the burden of their situation much more than did Dot. "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof," was Dot's opinion.

Sammy crawled out again and rescued the sled which was already buried in the snow. He dragged it to the opening and left it right over the hole so as to keep the snow from drifting in upon them.

"But it makes it so dark, Sammy!" said Tess, a little sharply.

"Wait a while. You can see better pretty soon. Your eyes get used to the dark—just like you went down cellar at night for a hod of coal."

"Oh, I wouldn't!" declared Dot. "But I'm not afraid of the dark. It's nothing you can feel."

So they were very cozy and fairly warm under the tree. Soon the snow had heaped so thickly

over the mouth of their shelter that they could not even hear the wind.

They had eaten a good lunch. Sammy had some nuts in his pockets. It was now about four o'clock. They were not likely to suffer for anything needful for some time. And, of course, neither of the three thought that their stay under the spruce tree would be for long.

"If the snow doesn't stop pretty soon, and so we can get out and find the way home, Neale O'Neil and Aggie will come for us," Dot said, with considerable cheerfulness for her. "I'm all warm now, and I don't care."

Sammy did not feel altogether as sure that they would escape from the difficulty so easily; but he did not openly express his belief. He was, like the little girls, glad to have found shelter. With provisions and a fire, he said, they could stay here like Crusoes.

"You know, Robinson Crusoe lived in a cave, and in a hut. And he was all alone till he got some goats and a Man Friday."

"We might have brought Billy Bumps along," said Dot thoughtfully.

"I guess I wouldn't want to live with an old goat," Tess observed, with scorn.

They had no means of measuring the passage of time, and of course it seemed that "hours and hours" must have passed before Sammy tried to look out through the opening the first time.

And this was no easy work. The snow had

gathered so quickly and packed down so hard upon the sled that the boy could scarcely raise it. Finally, by backing under the sled and rising up with it on his shoulders, the sturdy little fellow broke through the drift.

"I got it!" he shouted back to Tess and Dot. "But, oh, Je-ru-sa-*lem!* ain't it snowin' though? Bet it never snowed so hard before. I guess we'll have to stay here till they dig us out."

"Oh, Sammy! All night?" gasped Dot.

"Well, I don't know about that. But until this old snow stops, anyway."

He, nor the little girls, scarcely appreciated the fact that the worst blizzard of the winter had broken over that territory, and that trails and paths were being utterly obliterated. The keenest scented dog, and the most experienced woodsman, could not have traced the three children to their present shelter.

Sammy came in and fixed the sled again to keep out the snow. He felt pretty serious—for him. Sammy Pinkney was not in the habit of looking for the worst to happen. Quite the contrary.

Yet he could not throw off anxiety as easily as Dot could. As long as she was not hungry, and was warm, the smallest Corner House girl felt quite cheerful.

They could see a little better in their cozy nest now, and being assured that there were no mice, thought of other wild creatures of the forest did not disturb Dot Kenway.

"Let's play something," said Dot. "Cum-ge-cum!"

"What do you come by?" asked Tess quickly. This was an old, old game of guessing that Aunt Sarah Maltby had taught the little folks.

"I come by the letter 'S,' " declared Dot.

"Snow," guessed Sammy promptly.

"No."

"It's got to be the 'nitial of something in this—this house," Tess observed. "Shoes, Dottie?"

"No. 'Tisn't shoes. And 'tis in the house—if you call this a house."

"Shirt," Sammy declared.

"Nopy!"

"Sled?" guessed Tess.

"No, it is not 'sled,' " said the littlest girl.

"Stockin's?" suggested Sammy. "I've got a hole in one o' mine. Feels like my big toe was stranglin' to death, so it does."

"S-s-s—"

"Oh, stop!" shrieked Dot suddenly. "What's that at the door?"

The two little girls shrieked again and scrambled behind the trunk of the tree. Sammy was just as scared as a child could be, but he sat right where he was and watched the dim light grow at the hole over which he had pulled the sled.

Something was scratching there, dragging the sled away from over the hole in the snowdrift. Sammy did not know that even the hungriest animal in the forest was snugly housed during this

storm. The creatures of the wild do not hunt when the weather is so boisterous.

It might have been a wolf, or a bear, or a lynx, *or a tiger,* as far as the small boy knew. Just the same, having the responsibility of Tess and Dot on his mind, he had to stay and face the unknown.

Suddenly a voice spoke from without. It said with much disgust:

"Oh, shut up your squalling. I'm not going to bite you."

"Je-ru-sa-*lem!*" murmured Sammy. "What's this?"

In a minute he was reassured, for the sled was torn away and a head and shoulders appeared down the opening through the drift.

"Hello!" exclaimed the voice again. "How did you get here? How many of you are there?"

"Two girls and a boy. And we slid here," said Sammy, gulping down a big lump in his throat.

"*Girls?*" gasped the stranger, who seemed to be very little older than Sammy himself. "Girls out in this blizzard?"

"No. We're all safe in here under the tree," said Sammy, with some indignation. "I wouldn't let 'em stay out in the storm."

"Oh!" exclaimed the stranger. "And do you intend to stay here till it stops snowing?"

"Why not?" demanded Sammy.

"That won't be until to-morrow—maybe next day," was the cheerful response. "I guess you

don't know much about storms up here in the woods."

"Nope. We come from Milton."

"Oh!" exclaimed the other. "You're some of that bunch from Red Deer Lodge, aren't you?"

"Ye—yes, sir," Tess interposed politely. "Do you suppose you could show us the way home?"

"Just now I couldn't," said the other, wriggling his way into the shelter. "This is pretty good in here. But you'd better come to my cave."

"Oh! do you live in a cave?" asked Sammy.

"Isn't it dark?" asked Tess.

"Are there fishes in it with blind eyes?" demanded Dot, who had heard something about the fish of the streams in the Mammoth Cave, and thought all caves were alike.

"Fish?" snorted the newcomer. "I guess not! Wish there were. We'd eat them. And we need meat."

"Is—is your cave far?" asked Sammy, in some doubt.

"No. Just back of this tree. And we'd better get back there quick, or the door will be all snowed under. This is a big, big storm."

"Who are you?" Tess asked. "If you don't mind telling us. This is Sammy Pinkney; and I'm Tess Kenway; and this is my sister, Dot."

"Huh!" said the stranger. "I—I'm Rowdy."

"Rowdy?" repeated Tess, wonderingly.

"That's what they call me," said the other

hastily. "Just Rowdy. And we'd better go to my cave."

"But you don't live out here in the woods all by yourself, do you?" asked Sammy, in much surprise.

"No. But—but my father's gone a long way off." The boy hesitated a moment, and then added: "Gone to Canada—trapping. Won't be back for ever so long. So I live in the cave."

"Oh, my!" murmured Tess.

"Je-ru-sa-*lem!*" exclaimed Sammy. "Ain't you afraid to live here alone?"

"I'm not afraid," said their new friend. "And there's nobody to boss you all the time here. Come on. You follow me. Drag along the sled. We might need that after the snow's stopped."

He started to crawl out through the hole into the storm again, and the trio from Red Deer Lodge decided that there was nothing better to do than to follow him.

CHAPTER XXII

IN THE CAVE

The snow beat down upon them so when they were outside of the shelter that the little girls could scarcely get their breath. Dot clung to Tess' hand and bleated a few complaining words. But the strange boy said sharply:

"Don't be blubbering. We'll be all right in a minute. I want to hunt for something around here. That's what I come out of the cave for."

"Am not blubbering!" muttered Dot, quite indignant. "But this old snow—"

"Oh, I've got it!" shouted the strange boy, leaping ahead through the snow with great vigor. "Come on! Don't lose sight of me."

"You bet we won't," said Sammy, urging Tess and Dot on ahead of him and dragging the sled after.

"What is it?" asked Tess, curiously.

"A trap," said the other.

"Oh!"

"What kind of a trap?" asked the eager Sammy.

"Rabbit trap. Box trap. Rafe and I brought it down here with us and set it this morning. I put a handful of corn in it and I saw rabbit tracks

all about just before it began to snow so hard. Here it is."

The speaker had knelt down in the snow and was uncovering some long, narrow object with his hands.

"It's sprung, anyway. You see, the door's dropped," he said. "The rabbit pokes right in after the corn, and when he begins to eat the bait clear at the end of the box, he trips the trigger and the door falls. Yes! He's here!"

"Oh, Je-ru-sa-*lem!* A real rabbit?" gasped Sammy Pinkney.

"A poor little bunny?" murmured Tess, her tender heart at once disturbed at the thought of the trapped animal.

"Huh! If we are snowed up in that cave for a week or so," said the boy called Rowdy, "you'll be mighty glad I caught this rabbit."

He had lifted the door and thrust in his left hand to seize the animal.

"Oh! Oh!" squealed Dot. "Won't it bite you?"

"It doesn't bite with its hind legs," said Rowdy with scorn. "Ah! I got him."

He drew forth the rabbit, kicking and squirming. The little mouse-like cry the poor beast made sounded very pitiful to Tess. She murmured:

"Oh, don't hurt him!"

"Je-ru-sa-*lem!*" exclaimed Sammy to Rowdy. "Ain't girls the worst ever?"

"Huh!" said the strange boy, suddenly glaring

at Sammy Pinkney, "what do you know about girls?"

He was a dark boy, with ragged black hair that had evidently been sheared off roughly by an amateur barber. He was dressed warmly and in good clothes. He wore leggings that came up to his hips. He was bigger, and must have been older than Sammy.

He stood up now, with the kicking rabbit held by the hind legs. The trapped animal was fat and was of good size.

"Oh! Oh!" cried Dot. "He'll get away from you."

"Like fun he will."

"How are you going to kill him?" Sammy, the practical, asked.

"Break its neck," was the prompt reply.

"Oh! How awful!" gasped Tess. "Won't it hurt him?"

"It won't know anything about it," said Rowdy.

He was already holding the rabbit away from him almost at arm's length and poised his right hand, edge out, for the blow that was to finish the creature. Sharp and quick was the blow, the outer edge of the boy's hand striking across the back of the rabbit's neck just at the base of the brain. The vertebra was snapped in this way and the creature instantly killed—a merciful and sudden death. The rabbit kicked but once, and then was still.

"Oh! Oh!" murmured Tess.

"Oh, don't worry," said Rowdy. "Ike M'Graw showed me how to do that."

"Oh!" cried Dot. "*We* know Mr. Ike M'Graw —so we do."

"How did you come to know him?" demanded Rowdy, quickly and suspiciously, it seemed. "He isn't at home now."

"Yes, he is," said Sammy. "He was up at Red Deer Lodge last night and he was there again this morning."

"Oh!" ejaculated Rowdy, standing and holding the rabbit as though the information gave him considerable mental disturbance. "I—I thought he'd gone away for good."

Then he turned suddenly and plunged into the drifting snow. "Come on!" he exclaimed again. "This snow is drifting awfully."

Sammy drove the little girls ahead of him again. "Aw, go on!" he muttered. "He's all right. He's got some kind of a hide-out."

"I don't believe I like that Rowdy," said Tess softly. "He—he's real cruel. All boys are, I s'pose."

"They have to be," returned Sammy.

"Why?" demanded Tess, in wonder.

"'Cause girls are such softies," declared the impolite Sammy.

They plunged ahead, wading far above their waists now. Behind the trees the hillside rose abruptly. It towered so above their heads in the snow that the children were almost scared. Sup-

pose that hill of snow should tumble right down on top of them!

"Goodness!" exclaimed Tess, with some exasperation. "Where is your old cave?"

"Come on," said Rowdy, patiently. "It's here somewhere. But the old snow— Ye-e—yi, yi!" he suddenly yelled.

Faintly there came an answering voice—half smothered, wholly eerie sounding.

"Oh! Who's that?" demanded Sammy.

"Him," said Rowdy shortly.

"Then don't you live alone?" Tess demanded.

"I have my brother with me," said Rowdy, plunging on to the right.

The snow beat into their faces and eyes, almost blinding them and wholly stopping their chatter. Above their heads the huge trees rocked, limbs writhing as though they were alive and in pain. And from these writhing limbs the snow was shaken down in avalanches.

One great blob of snow fell square on Sammy, trudging on behind the procession, and he went down with a howl like a wolf, buried to his ears.

"Oh, Sammy! Sammy!" shrieked Tess, above the wind. "Are you hurt?"

"I—I'm smothered!" groaned the boy, struggling to get out of the heap of snow. "Hey, you Rowdy! Get us out of this, or we'll be buried and lost."

"Come on!" sang out the bigger boy from up ahead. "O-ee! Rafe!" he shouted.

A figure appeared before them—the figure of a boy not much bigger than Rowdy.

"What have you there?" a hoarse voice demanded.

"A rabbit."

"I mean who are those behind you?" and the hoarse voice was very tart now.

"A couple of girls and a boy," said Rowdy. "I picked 'em up back there by the trap."

"Well! But we don't keep a hotel," said the second boy.

"Hush!" commanded Rowdy. "Where are your manners? And they come from the Lodge," he added.

"How are we going to feed so many people?" was the rather selfish demand of the second boy from the cave.

"Mercy! you're a regular pig, Rafe," exclaimed Rowdy. "Go on. Take this rabbit. I'll help the little girl. She's almost done for."

Dot Kenway really was breathless and almost exhausted. She was glad to be taken in the strong arms of Rowdy. He staggered along behind the one called Rafe, and so came to an opening behind a bowlder which seemed to have been rolled by nature against the hillside.

The hole was sheltered from the direct effect of the wind that was drifting the snow in a huge mound against the bowlder. Rafe, with the rabbit, dived first into the hole. Rowdy followed, with Dot in his arms.

"Oh! Oh!" cried the littlest girl with delight. "Here's a fire."

"Isn't that splendid?" demanded Tess, who came next and saw the blaze at the back of the cave, between two stones. "Why! what a nice cave you've got here."

The fire lit up the cave, for it was only about a dozen feet square. Only, it was not really square, being of a circular shape at the back. The smoke from the fire rose straight up and disappeared through a hole in the low roof through which there must have been considerable draught.

Of course, there was a strong smell of wood smoke in the cave; but not enough smoke to make one's eyes smart. There were some old blankets and rugs on the floor for carpet. Against one side wall was a great heap of balsam boughs, over which were flung robes.

When Sammy came staggering in with the sled he fairly shouted his approval of the cave.

"Je-ru-sa-*lem!* what a jim-dandy place. Say! I bet Neale O'Neil would like to see this."

"Well, you needn't be bringing anybody here and showing it. This is our own particular hide-out—Rowdy's and mine. So now," observed Rafe, who seemed to be less friendly than his brother.

"Oh, hush," pleaded the latter. "Do be hospitable, Rafe. Don't you know these kids are our guests?"

"'Guests!'" snorted the other.

"Yes, they are."

"Oh, please don't quarrel about us," urged Tess Kenway gently. "We'll go right away as soon as it stops snowing, and we'll never tell anybody about this cave if you don't want us to."

"Don't mind him," said Rowdy. "He's got a cold and a grouch. Come on, Rafe; help me pluck this rabbit."

"Oh, I'll do that!" cried the red-faced Sammy. "Let me!"

While the little girls were glad to sit before the fire on the blankets, he wished to make himself useful. Besides, to help skin a real rabbit was a height of delight to which Sammy Pinkney had never before risen.

"All right," said Rowdy. "You get the potatoes and onions ready, Rafe. We have salt and pepper and we can have a nice rabbit stew."

"Just fry it," recommended the other cave dweller. "That's less trouble."

"You do as I say!" exclaimed Rowdy, sternly. "There are five of us instead of two to eat, and we've got to make this rabbit go a long way."

"Well, who brought them in? I didn't," said Rafe, angrily. "You knew we didn't have any too much to eat."

"You are a nice one!" began Rowdy, when Tess broke in with:

"I'm awful sorry we came if we are going to make trouble. We can go back under that tree—can't we, Sammy?"

"I'm not going back there," Dot said stubbornly. "There's no fire there. If this other boy doesn't like us because we are girls, can't he go out and live under the tree himself?"

This idea seemed to amuse Rowdy a good deal. He laughed aloud—and the laugh did not sound just like a boy's laugh, either. Tess stared at him wonderingly.

"If Rafe's going to be so mean," he said, "he ought to be put out. Go ahead and peel the potatoes and onions, Rafe."

"Sha'n't. That's girl's work," growled Rafe.

"Oh! If you've got a knife I'll peel them," said Tess. "I don't mind."

"All right," Rowdy said. "Give her the knife, Rafe. Put over the pot with some snow in it. The little girl can feed that till there is a lot of water ready. We'll want some for tea."

"Don't want tea," growled Rafe. "I want coffee."

"Oh, stop that, Rafe, or I'll slap you good!" promised Rowdy, his vexation finally boiling over. "I never saw such a boy. Come on here, Sammy. Hold this rabbit by the hind legs and I'll skin it in a jiffy."

With the help of a knife to start the rabbit's hide, Rowdy "plucked" the bunny very handily. It was drawn and cleaned, too, and soon Rowdy was disjointing it as one would a chicken, using a flat stone for a butcher block.

"It—it looks so much like a kitten," murmured

Tess. "Do you suppose it is really good to eat?"

"You wait till you taste it," chuckled Rowdy, who seemed to be a very practical boy indeed. "I'm going to make dumplings with it, too. I have flour and lard. We'll have a fine supper by and by. Then Rafe will feel better."

Rafe merely coughed and grunted. He seemed determined not to be friendly, or even pleasant.

Tess was an experienced potato peeler. She often helped Linda or Mrs. MacCall at home in Milton. In the matter of the onions she was quite as successful, although she confessed that they made her cry.

"I don't see why onions act so," Dot said, wiping her own eyes. "There ought to be some way of smothering 'em while you take their jackets off. Oh, Tess, that one squirted right into my face!"

"You'll have to take your face away from me, then," said her sister. "I can't tell where the onion's going to squirt next. They are worse than those clams we got down at Pleasant Cove, about squirting."

"Goodness' sake!" exclaimed Rowdy. "Clams and onions! Never heard them compared before. Did you, Rafe?"

"Don't bother me," growled Rafe, from the bed where he had lain down.

Rowdy kept right on with his cooking. There being plenty of snow melted, he put down the disjointed rabbit with a little water and pepper and salt to simmer. Later he put in the onions and

the potatoes. But they all had to simmer slowly for some time before the dumplings were made and put into the covered pot with the rabbit stew.

The children were all very hungry indeed (all save Rafe, the grouch) before Rowdy pronounced the stew ready to be eaten. By that time it was late in the evening. It seemed to the younger children as though they had been living in the cave already for a long, long time!

CHAPTER XXIII

ANXIETY

In this valley into which Sammy and the two youngest Corner House girls had coasted without realizing their unfortunate change of direction, the blizzard that had swept down from the northeast upon the wilderness about Red Deer Lodge did not reveal to the castaways its greatest velocity.

The wind was mild in the valley compared to the way it swept across the ridge on which the Birdsalls' home had been built. Already, when Neale O'Neil discovered the absence of the small sled Sammy and Tess and Dot had taken, the storm was becoming threatening in the extreme.

Urged by Mr. Howbridge, Neale ran into the house to make sure that Sammy and the little girls were really gone. Nobody indoors knew anything about the trio. Instantly anxiety was aroused in the minds of every one.

Hedden, John and Lawrence, as well as Luke Shepard, soon joined in the search. Ike M'Graw of course took the lead. He knew the locality, and he knew the nature of the storm that had now developed after forty-eight hours of threatening.

"No use lookin' for them twins," he had told Mr. Howbridge bluntly. "If they got away from here this mornin' with grub and a gun, they'll likely be all right for a while. They know where to hole up, it's likely, over this storm. 'Tain't as though they hadn't lived in the woods a good deal, winter and summer. When this storm is over I'll have a look for them twins, and like enough I'll find 'em all right. They air smart young shavers—'specially little Missie.

"But these here young ones you brought with you—well, they don't know nothin' about the woods. If they started up that road to have a slide, no knowin' where they are now. They've got to be found and brought home. Yes, sir!"

Ruth and the other girls had come running to the back kitchen where the party was making ready for departure. Agnes and Cecile were in tears; but although Ruth felt even more keenly that she had neglected the little folks, and because of that neglect they were lost, she kept her head.

The oldest Kenway hurried matters in the kitchen, and before Ike was ready to start with his crew, she brought two big thermos bottles, one with hot milk and the other with hot coffee.

"That's a good idee, Miss," said the woodsman, buttoning up his leather coat. "But we'll probably get them youngsters so quick they won't be much cold. Scared, mostly."

All the members of the searching party did not feel so confident as Ike's expression pictured his

feelings. And perhaps Ike said this only to help ease the minds of those who remained at the Lodge.

Neale and Luke walked side by side as they set forth against the wind that now blew so hard. The snow sheeted them about so quickly that they were lost to the vision of the girls and Mr. Howbridge before they had gone twenty yards.

The boys were right behind M'Graw. The other men trailed them.

"Don't you fellers stray off the road we're goin' to follow," advised the old woodsman. "This is a humdinger of a storm, and it's goin' to get worse and worse from now on."

"Those poor kids will be buried in it," Luke shouted in Neale's ear.

"We'll dig 'em out, then," returned Neale, confidently. "Don't give up the ship before we've even started."

But there was not much talk after getting into the road up which they knew Sammy and the little girls had started with the sled. In fact, they could not talk. By this time the blizzard was at its height, and it was blowing directly in their faces as they advanced.

Over boot-tops, over knees, even leg-deep where the drifts were, the searchers pressed on. Hedden overtook the backwoodsman and shouted:

"Hadn't we better separate, Mr. M'Graw, and beat the bushes on either side of this road?"

"No. Don't believe it's safe. And I don't

think them little shavers separated. They've holed-in together somewhere by this time, or—"

He did not finish his remark, but plowed on. He did not pass a hummock or snow-covered stump beside the road that he did not kick into and quite thoroughly examine. Every time Neale O'Neil saw one of these drifts he felt suddenly ill. Suppose the little folks should be under that heap of snow? Nor did Luke bear the uncertainty in lighter vein. There were tears frozen on his cheeks as they pressed on.

The falling snow and sleet, driven by the wind, seemed like a solid wall ahead of them. This buffeted the searchers with tremendous power. It took all their individual force to stand against the storm.

When they finally reached the summit of the road, where the young people had started the bobsled for the long slide that forenoon, they had found no sign of Sammy and the little girls.

Lawrence, one of the men, was completely exhausted. Ike made him sit down in the shelter of a tree and dosed him with a big draught of the hot coffee.

"Don't want to have to lug you back in our arms, young man," snorted the old woodsman. "You city fellers ain't got much backbone, I allow."

Meanwhile the other members of the searching party examined every brush pile and heap of snow for a circle of twenty yards around the point

where Ike and Lawrence waited. Neale and Luke shrieked themselves hoarse calling the names of the trio of lost children.

"Do you suppose any wild animal has attacked them, or frightened them, Mr. M'Graw?" Hedden asked.

"Lynx and them is holed up, all right," declared the backwoodsman with conviction. "Nothing would bother them while this storm lasts. But I declare I don't see why we ain't found 'em," he added, shaking his head. "Not if they come this way."

"I don't think they would have gone beyond this spot, do you?" Neale asked. "Here's the top of the hill. They must have started for this place with the sled."

"'Twould seem so," agreed Ike M'Graw.

"I doubt if they could have walked so far from the house," said Luke.

"'Twasn't snowin' like this when they was on the way. But if they come up here and slid down again, why didn't we find 'em on our way up? Beats me!"

"Perhaps we should have brought Tom Jonah with us," Neale observed. "He might have nosed them out."

"The old dog couldn't scurcely git through this here snow," said M'Graw. "I don't guess he can help us much till the storm's over. But let's go back. Them young ones must have turned out o' this road somewheres. Stands to reason the snow

scared 'em and they started back. They must have got out o' this woodroad, and then—''

He slowly shook his head. His anxiety was shared by all. Wherever the children had gone, they were surely overtaken by the storm. If they had found some shelter they might be safely ''holed up'' till the storm stopped. But if not, neither Ike M'Graw nor the others knew where to look for them.

And the blizzard was now sweeping so desperately across the ridge that the sturdiest of the party could scarcely stand against it. Had it not been at their backs as they headed for Red Deer Lodge again, it is doubtful if they would have got to their destination alive.

The last few hundred yards the party made by holding hands and pulling each other through the drifts. It was a tremendous task, and even M'Graw was blown when Red Deer Lodge was reached.

Lawrence was the worst off of them all. Neale and Luke literally dragged him through the storm from the sheds to the rear door of the Lodge. He would probably have died in the drifts had he been alone.

The girls and Mrs. MacCall, as well as Mr. Howbridge, were awaiting the return of the searchers with the utmost anxiety. Not only were they disturbed over the loss of the three children, but the possibility of the men themselves not returning had grown big in their minds. The rapidity with

which the snow was gathering and the fierceness of the gale threatened disaster to the searchers.

When M'Graw fell against the storm door at the rear of the house and burst it open, everybody within hearing came running to the back kitchen. When Ruth saw that they did not bring with them the two little girls and Sammy, she broke down utterly.

Her despair was pitiful. She had held in bravely until now. To think that they had come up here to Red Deer Lodge for a jolly vacation only to have this tragedy occur!

For that it was tragedy even Ike M'Graw now admitted. There was no knowing when the storm would cease. If the children had not been providentially sheltered before the gale reached this high point, it was scarcely possible that they would be found alive after the blizzard was over.

At this hour no human being could live for long exposed to the storm which gripped the whole countryside.

There was anxiety in the cave in the valley as well as at Red Deer Lodge about this same hour. But it must be confessed that the children who had taken refuge in the cave were mostly anxious about that rabbit stew!

Was there going to be enough to go around? And had Rowdy made the dumplings all right and seasoned the stew so that it would be palatable?

"Why, you're all sitting around here and sniff-

"The housekeeping arrangements of the cave were primitive."

ing at that stew every time I lift the pot cover like hungry dogs," declared Rowdy. "I guess if it doesn't turn out right, you'll eat me."

"Oh, no," said Dot. "We wouldn't like to do that, for we aren't cannon balls."

"You aren't *what?*" cried the boy, amazed.

"Oh, dear, Dot! Why *will* you get so mixed up in your words?" Tess wailed. "She doesn't mean 'cannon balls,' Rowdy; she means 'cannibals.' And we aren't. It is bad enough to have to eat rabbit when it looks so much like a cat."

This very much amused Rowdy and Sammy Pinkney; but Rafe, the grouchy brother, would not be even friendly enough to laugh at the smallest Corner House girl.

"I don't know what's got into him," said Rowdy. "He never was this way before."

Rafe lay on the bed of balsam branches, and when his brother tried to stir him up he growled and said: "Let me alone!" But when the stew was done he was ready for his share.

The housekeeping arrangements of the cave were primitive. There were a few odd plates and dishes. But knives and forks were not plentiful, and the tea had to be drunk out of tin cups, and there were only three of them.

There was condensed milk for the tea; and besides the dumplings which Rowdy had made, there were crackers and some cold cornbread left from a previous meal.

Rowdy seemed to be a pretty good cook for a boy

of his age. And he was just as handy with dishes and in housekeeping matters as a girl.

The visitors praised his rabbit stew. They really had to do that because they ate so much of it. Rafe grumbled that they took more than their share.

"I'd like to know what's got into you!" Rowdy said to his brother in great disgust. "You are just as mean as poison ivy—so there!"

"I am not!"

"Yes, you are. And what are you scratching that way for?"

"Because my chest itches. What does anybody scratch for?" growled Rafe.

After eating, Rafe rolled up in a robe and went to sleep at one end of the bed. The others helped Rowdy clean up; and, as he said, "just to pay Rafe off for being so mean," they had dessert which Rafe had no part in. Rowdy produced a can of pears and they opened and ate them all!

"Je-ru-sa-*lem!*" ejaculated Sammy, when this was finished, "ain't it fun living in a cave? I'd rather be here than up to that Red Deer Lodge place. Hadn't you, Tess?"

"No-o," admitted the honest but polite little girl. "I can't say just that. But I think Rowdy's cave is very nice, and we are having a very nice time here."

Dot frankly yawned. She had been doing that, off and on, all through supper.

"I'm afraid there won't be anybody to put my

Alice-doll to bed to-night," she said. "And I haven't any nightgown with me. Why, Tess! what shall we do?"

"I guess you wouldn't want to take off your clothes here. It isn't warm enough," said Rowdy.

"But can't we say our prayers?" murmured the startled Dot. "Of course, Tess and I spent the night once right out under a tree—didn't we, Tessie? Last summer, you know, when we went on that tour in our automobile. But we said our prayers first."

"I guess we'd all better say our prayers and go to bed," said Rowdy. "This is a pretty big storm, and maybe it won't stop snowing for ever so long. The more we sleep, the less we'll know about it."

Therefore, a little later, the four joined the already slumbering Rafe upon the heaped up branches, wrapping themselves as best they could in the torn robes and pieces of carpet.

It was not a very comfortable bed or very nice bedding; but they were all too weary to criticize the shortcomings of Rowdy's cave. At least, it was shelter from the storm.

CHAPTER XXIV

RAFE IS CROSS

Sammy Pinkney awoke to hear barking. But it was not Tom Jonah, as he had dreamed it was. He was chilly, too, and when his eyes got used to the semi-darkness of the cave he was sleeping in, Sammy discovered that Rafe had deliberately removed the share of the bedclothes that had been over Sammy and spread them over himself.

"Aw, say!" muttered Sammy. "Ain't he fresh?"

Then Rafe barked again.

"He certainly has one fierce cold!" muttered Sammy. "I ain't got the heart to start nothing on him."

Instead he got up and crept over to the fireplace where there were still some red embers. Rowdy, or somebody, had evidently been up more than once to put fuel on the fire, and now Sammy did the same and blew the coals until the wood caught and blazed.

Beside the fireplace was a great stack of billets of seasoned wood. Evidently this cave had been used as a living place for a long time; or perhaps

it had merely been stocked with fuel for a long time.

Sammy hoped it was well stocked with food, too. For Sammy was hungry, right then! It seemed to him that the rabbit stew had been eaten a long time before. There was no clock; but judging from the way he felt he thought he must have slept the clock around.

He wondered if the storm had ceased. Was there likelihood of their being able to get back to Red Deer Lodge this morning (if it was morning), or would they have to remain until some one came to dig them out?

The fire having sprung up now, and the flickering light aiding him to see his way about the cavern, Sammy moved toward the entrance. This aperture beside the huge bowlder was scarcely higher than Sammy himself. Before it Rowdy and Rafe, the two strange boys, had hung a piece of matting. When Sammy pulled this matting away he saw snow—snow that filled the hole "chock-er-block," as he expressed it.

"Je-ru-sa-*lem!*" muttered the startled Sammy, "I guess it did snow some. How are we ever going to dig out of here?"

There was a slab of wood standing beside the opening, leaning against the rock. Sammy seized this and began to dig desperately at the snow.

So interested did he become in digging through the bank that filled the cave entrance that he did not pay much attention to where he flung the snow

behind him. He was still digging like a woodchuck when Rowdy's voice reached him:

"What are you trying to do? Going to fill this cave with snow?"

"Say!" said Sammy, "it's getting-up time. And there's an awful lot of snow here. I guess we're buried alive, that's what I guess!"

Just then Rafe coughed again, and his brother hopped up and went to him.

"Don't scatter that snow all about, Sammy," he commanded. Then to Rafe: "What's the matter, Rafe, dear? Don't you feel any better?"

"I'm—I'm chilly," chattered the boy with the cough.

"I'll cover you up better," said Rowdy, getting his own blanket. "And we'll have more fire and some breakfast. Are you hungry, Rafe?"

"I'm thirsty," said Rafe, rather whiningly. "I want some—some coffee."

"I'll make some right away. Don't be sick, now, Rafe. I don't see what we should do for you if you got sick. What *are* you scratching for?"

"Because I itch," replied Rafe drowsily.

But he snuggled down under the coverings until the coffee should be made. He seemed in a pleasanter humor, at least, than on the evening before.

Rowdy bustled about, making coffee and stirring up some kind of bread by the light of the fire. Soon the fuel heaped upon the blaze made the cave

warm again, although the smoke set them all to coughing.

The two little girls woke up. Dot demanded a light.

"I don't like this old smoky fire to see by," she complained. "Why don't you keep your fire in a stove, Rowdy?"

"Haven't a stove," replied Rowdy promptly. "How did you girls sleep?"

"All right, I guess," Tess replied. "What are you doing, Sammy? Can we go home this morning?"

Sammy was still digging. He tramped the snow into a corner behind him. But the more snow he dug out of the hole the more there seemed to be. He took a round stick as tall as he was himself and pushed it up through the snowbank, and it let in no light at all.

"Je-ru-sa-*lem!*" he cried. "There's all the snow in the world blown into this hole, I guess. We'll never get out of here!"

"Oh!" squealed Dot, "don't say that, Sammy. Of course we must get out. It's coming Christmas, you know, and I've got to finish my motto that I'm making for Ruthie. It's got to be done, and I didn't bring it with me."

"But," said Tess, yet with some hesitation now, "the folks will surely come to find us. Don't you say so, Rowdy?"

"If they know where you are," said Rowdy.

"But we didn't tell 'em," growled Sammy, coming to the fire to get warm.

"That'll be all right," Dot declared, seeing no difficulty. "Tom Jonah will find us. You know, we never can hide from Tom Jonah."

Tess explained to Rowdy that Tom Jonah was a dog, and a very good dog, too. But she secretly had some doubts, as did Sammy, that the old dog would be able to find them away down at the bottom of this hole where they had coasted. She was careful to say nothing to frighten Dot, or to discourage her.

They were all much interested in Rowdy's preparations for breakfast. He produced a strip of bacon and he fried some of this in a pan while the bread was cooking. There was no butter, and the coffee was rather muddy; but not even Dot complained, as long as she got her share.

While they ate, they talked. At least, Rowdy and the visitors talked. Rafe drank the coffee and ate his share of the breakfast, and then went back to the bed and heaped almost all the coverings over him. He had little red specks on his chest and arms, and he said he could not get warm.

Sammy was desirous of getting out through the cave entrance to see if it had stopped snowing and what the prospect was for clear weather. But he dug for an hour after breakfast without accomplishing much. Then Rowdy came to help him.

"I tell you what I think," said the Milton boy, in a low voice, so the girls would not hear. "I b'-

lieve all that snow that was up on that hill has just come tumbling down before this cave—so there!"

"An avalanche!" gasped Rowdy.

"I don't know what you call it. But that's what I think," repeated Sammy. "We'll never dig out of here in this world."

"But I guess we've got to," said Rowdy sharply. "We can't live here long."

"It ain't a bad sort of a place," said Sammy cheerfully. "I guess Robinson Crusoe didn't have a better cave."

"He had more food than we have," said Rowdy thoughtfully. "And you kids do eat a lot. If I'd known you were coming here to live I'd have brought more stuff to eat—I surely would!"

"Can't we catch any more rabbits?" suggested Sammy.

"How are you going to catch rabbits when we can't get outside this cave?" returned Rowdy. "I guess all boys are foolish. That sounds just like Rafe."

"Say! You're a boy yourself," said Sammy, in surprise. "You needn't talk."

"Oh!" rejoined Rowdy, and said nothing more for a time.

But they gave up digging through the snowbank. The snow seemed packed very hard, and it was difficult to dig with a slab of wood. If there had been an avalanche over the mouth of the cave their chances for digging out were small, indeed.

Luckily none of the children realized just what that meant.

Living in the cave was some fun, as Sammy declared. At least, it had the virtue of novelty. The time did not drag. They played games, paid forfeits, and Tess told stories, and Rowdy sang songs. He had a very sweet voice, and Tess told him that he sang almost as well as Agnes did.

"And Agnes sings in the church chorus," explained Tess.

"And I think you cook 'most as good as a girl," said Dot. "I guess you cook 'most as good as our Linda, at home, in Milton."

If Rowdy considered these statements compliments he did not say so. Indeed, he seemed to be very silent after they were made. He sat beside Rafe on the bed for some time, and they whispered together. Rafe seemed to get no better, and he slept a good deal.

So did the other children sleep, after a while. Having no means of telling whether one day or two had passed, after eating a second time they all curled down, covering themselves as best they could, and found in slumber a panacea for their anxiety.

It was not Sammy who awoke the next time, but Tess. She became wide awake in a moment, hearing a sound from somewhere outside of the cave. She sat up to hear it repeated.

Something was scrambling and scratching in the snow. She even heard a "woof! woof!" just as

though some animal tossed aside the snow and blew through it. Tess was badly frightened.

"Sammy! Rowdy! Oh, please!" she cried. "Is it a bear?"

"Is what a bear?" demanded Rowdy, waking up in some confusion. "I guess you've been dreaming, Tess."

"That isn't any dream!" cried the Corner House girl, and she sprang up, seizing Dot in her arms.

Rowdy screamed now; not at all like a boy would cry out. He leaped from the bed and ran to the other side of the room. There, hanging on two pegs, was a small rifle. Sammy had eyed it with longing. But Rafe, awakened as well, shouted:

"No good taking that, Rowdy! It isn't loaded. You know I shot away the last cartridge at that old fox."

"Oh, Rafe! I told you then you were foolish," said Rowdy. "What shall we do?"

"What is it?" yelled Sammy, tumbling out of bed.

"It's a wolf!" replied Rowdy. "I can hear it! Listen!"

Dot added her voice to the din. "Tell that wolf we haven't anything to throw to him, so he might's well go away," she declared.

Rowdy ran to the hole in the snow. It seemed to be suddenly lighter there. Was the beast that was scratching through letting daylight into the cave?

Rafe shrieked and leaped out from under his coverings.

"You'll be killed, Rowdy! Don't go there!" he cried.

Dashing across the floor of the cave, he seized Rowdy and pulled him out of the way.

"Give me the gun!" he ordered, wresting it from Rowdy's hands. He seized it by the barrel and poised it as a club.

"Get out, Rowdy!" he commanded. "This isn't any place for a girl!"

At that amazing statement the little girls from the old Corner House and Sammy Pinkney were so utterly surprised that they quite forgot the savage animal that seemed to be trying to dig into the cave to attack them.

CHAPTER XXV

HOLIDAYS—CONCLUSION

It was rather fortunate that Ralph Birdsall had shot way his last cartridge in killing the fox three nights before from the garret window of Red Deer Lodge. Otherwise he might have hurt Tom Jonah.

For the old dog scrambled through the drift ahead of the searching party that had started out as soon as the gale ceased. Tom Jonah was pretty near crazy—or he acted so.

Barking and leaping, the dog threw himself upon Ralph and tumbled him over. He was prodigal with his expressions of joy and affection, going from one to the other of the five children, and in his boisterousness tumbling them in heaps.

"I never did! Tom Jonah! why don't you behave?" demanded Tess. "And I have been telling Rowdy and Rafe, these nice boys, just how good and smart you are."

"Je-ru-sa-*lem!*" gasped Sammy, finally getting his breath. "They ain't boys!"

"Who aren't boys?" asked Tess, wonderingly.

"Well—well, *this* one isn't," said Sammy, pointing at Rowdy. "He's a girl, that's what he is."

"Why, Rowdy! I *thought* there was something funny about you," Tess Kenway said. "You—you were so much nicer than boys are. I declare!"

But this point was discussed no further at the time. For into the entrance to the cave came tumbling Neale O'Neil and Luke Shepard, covered with snow and shouting their joy, while behind them was Ike M'Graw.

"Ralph! Roweny!" shouted the old timber cruiser. "Jest what sort of doin's do you call this?"

Neale and Luke greeted the three lost Milton children with vehemence. Afterward Sammy confessed that maybe it was a good thing to get lost, for then you found out how much folks thought of you.

These three, with Tom Jonah, made up the searching party this time. They had come away from Red Deer Lodge without letting the others know where they were going.

It was really Agnes who started them off on the right trail. While the gale still rocked Red Deer Lodge in its arms and nobody could go out of doors, Agnes remembered about the fork in the road where she and her friends had coasted.

"If the little ones tried to slide, they might have taken that wrong road," she said. "They could have slid right into it without knowing. Where does it go, Mr. M'Graw?"

It did not take Ike long to study out what she

meant. Then he did some more "figgering." He knew exactly where the branch road led to.

He was so successful in this figuring that he encouraged the young people from Milton to believe as he did. He saw a chance for the three little folks who had gone sliding to be safely housed in the cave that he called "Ralph and little Missie's playhouse."

The Birdsall twins had often camped out in that cave hollowed in the hillside at the bottom of the valley. If Sammy and Tess and Dot had slid down there, more than likely, so Ike said, they had found the cave and had taken refuge there.

In addition (but this was his own secret) the timber cruiser believed that the twins, having been in Red Deer Lodge, had started for that very cave some hours before the gale broke.

If the young Birdsalls were there, the lost children would be safe enough. This had proved to be the case.

Nevertheless, the old woodsman scolded Ralph and Rowena heartily.

"What d'you mean?" he demanded, "by running way from your guardian! Mr. Howbridge is as fine a man as ever stepped in shoe-leather. I'm ashamed of you children. And when you did come clean up here, why didn't you come to my shack and stay?"

"We did go there; but you were away. Then we thought we had a right to live in our own house. You know papa built it," said Rowena, bravely.

"We didn't know anybody was coming there this winter. And we brought some food with us from Coxford. Then those people came, and we waited till we could get out without being caught at it."

"Some young ones! Some young ones!" groaned M'Graw. "Well, now, you'll go back to the Lodge and see what Mr. Howbridge has to say to you. And you dressed like a boy, Roweny!"

"I don't care," said "Rowdy." "Ralph dressed up like a girl at first. We came up here that way. But other kids picked on us so that I thought I'd better be a boy as well as Ralph. And we had these clothes at Red Deer Lodge. I make as good a boy as he does a girl."

"Say!" asked Neale O'Neil, vastly interested, "you two stopped a week at the village on the ice and fished, didn't you?"

"Yes," said Rowena.

"And you were girls there?"

"Yes."

"Well," said Neale, laughing now, "what I want to know is, which of you it was that thrashed those two boys that tried to steal your set lines?"

"That was Rowena!" croaked Ralph from the bed. "I acted just like a girl ought to and let them take the lines; but Rowena fought them, and licked them good, too!"

There was a deal of talk after that, but most of it was done following the arrival of the party at Red Deer Lodge. As soon as that had occurred, however, and Mrs. MacCall had heard Ralph cough

and heard about the itching, she made an examination.

"There!" she declared, half an hour later after she had put the boy between blankets and given him a hot drink, "I might have known something would happen if we came up to this out-of-the-world place."

"I should think something had happened!" murmured Ruth, who still held Dot in her lap and hugged her as though she could not let her go again. "What is the matter with Ralph?"

"Chickenpox. And it's coming out thick on him right this minute."

"Oh! Oh! *Chickens?*" gasped the smallest Corner House girl. "Are they roosting on him? No wonder Rafe scratched."

"And like enough you'll be scratchin', my lassie," said the Scotch woman. "One an' all of you. I never knew it to fail. If one bairn gets it, all the others in the neighborhood catches it."

Nor was she a poor prophet. All the little folks, even Rowena, developed mild cases of chickenpox and were kept in the house for most of the holidays.

Holidays they were, nevertheless. Perhaps the little Corner House folk had never had so good a time over Christmas and New Year's. Ralph and Rowena Birdsall proved to be rollicking, good-natured children, and they felt themselves at home at Red Deer Lodge and could entertain Tess and Dot and Sammy Pinkney.

"We won't blame them for giving us chicken scratches," said Dot to Tess. "At least, Ralph did. But he couldn't help it. And mine's most gone, anyway."

The "older young folks," as Mr. Howbridge called them, had most delightful times out of doors, as well as in. There was four or five feet of snow on the ground, on the level, and it was packed hard enough to make splendid snow-shoeing.

Ike M'Graw had plenty of snowshoes, and he taught them all how to use them. When they became adept he led them in short jaunts all about the section in which Red Deer Lodge was situated.

The boys went out with him at night, hunting. Neale and Luke both killed rabbits, and Neale shot a bigger fox than the one Ralph Birdsall had knocked over.

Those were wonderful days; but the nights were still more wonderful, for they were moon-lighted for most of the holiday time.

There is nothing better than coasting by moonlight, and of that sport Ruth, Agnes and Cecile, as well as the two boys, had their fill.

Nor did they overlook the two holidays, Christmas and New Year's. Ike cut and trimmed a huge Christmas tree and that was set up in the main hall of the Lodge and decorated in a most beautiful manner. Presents had been brought up from Milton for everybody. And although Ralph and Rowena Birdsall and Ike M'Graw were

"added entries," as Luke said, they were not allowed to feel slighted when the presents were given out on Christmas night.

A big sledge came through from Coxford two days after Christmas, and this brought additional supplies for the party at Red Deer Lodge. There came on the sledge, too, the red-faced Mr. Neven who wished to buy the standing timber on a part of the Birdsall tract.

There was much talk between the lumberman, Mr. Howbridge and M'Graw regarding the timber. But Ike proved himself a good "figgerer" in more ways than one. The lawyer remained determined to accept the old timber cruiser's report as correct and finally Neven came to their terms.

Before the holiday of the Milton party was ended, a big gang of lumbermen came up the toteroad from Coxford and the lake, ready to set up a camp in the valley near the twins' cave, and finish the season by cutting over several acres of the Birdsall piece.

"I won't want to see our place up here again until the new timber is grown," cried Rowena, mournfully.

"Then you'll have to wait till we get through college," Ralph told her. "Mr. Howbridge is going to have us live with him till we go to college. But I expect he'll bring us up here once in a while if you change your mind, Rowdy, and want to come."

"Don't call me 'Rowdy,' Ralph," said his sister. "That was only for our trip up here. And, anyhow, I am not going to be a boy—never—any more!"

"We're going to have a lot to tell the kids back home," remarked Sammy Pinkney one day before they left Red Deer Lodge. "Je-ru-sa-*lem!* think of that long slide, Tess."

"But it ended bad," said Tess.

"It ended good!" cried the boy. "Didn't we find Ralph and Rowena, and live in a cave, and eat rabbit stew, and—"

"And get chicken scratches," put in Dot. "But mine don't scratch any now. The chickens went away quick."

THE END

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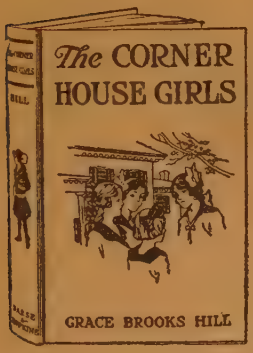

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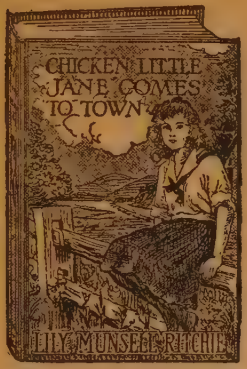

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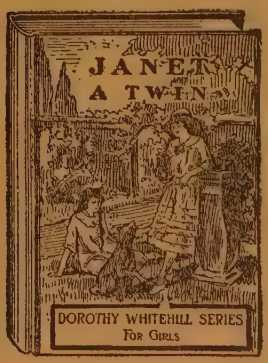

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